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# REPORT: LEVERAGING SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM FOR REVENUE GROWTH



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PREPARED AND PRESENTED BY

**SOLUTIONS**  
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# 1 Introduction

The Solutions Journalism Revenue Project (SJRP), which ran between February 2020 and February 2021, aimed to explore how a diverse range of newsrooms could leverage solutions journalism to generate revenue. Among the questions the project sought to answer were: Can reporting on responses to social problems help newsrooms attract financial backers and contribute to their economic sustainability? Is there a business case that supports this journalistic practice?

**Over the yearlong project, we gathered both quantitative and qualitative evidence indicating that producing solutions journalism can help news organizations bring in revenue.**

We are particularly heartened by this outcome given the extraordinary challenges faced by newsrooms across the industry this past year, including COVID-19 and urgent news issues, such as the movement for racial justice and the presidential election, that demanded significant attention from already stretched newsroom staff.

Our partner newsrooms' dedication to experimenting with and keeping the focus on solutions journalism is testimony to its value in advancing their revenue objectives and larger goals of serving communities with a different approach to producing information that is in the public interest.

The takeaways below reflect results from SJN's work, both with the 12 U.S.-based newsrooms that formed the yearlong SJRP cohort and with numerous other newsrooms we've worked with outside the cohort where data and insights are relevant to this report.

Together, they will provide a broader perspective on the main trend this brief seeks to highlight: **Revenue related to solutions journalism is growing rapidly, and focusing on this reporting practice can help newsrooms attain their sustainability goals.**

In short, realigning your newsroom's priorities to incorporate reporting on the work of people tackling your communities' problems is not only a more meaningful approach to journalism. It can also attract financial support from a range of individuals and institutions. I hope this report will inspire you to join this paradigm shift.

We're thankful to the Google News Initiative for providing funding for this yearlong pilot project.

**Alec Saelens, SJRP manager**

## Key Findings:

- There is value in connecting solutions journalism to revenue generating efforts, and particularly fundraising. Funders are eager to support this approach to reporting.
  - Nine of the 12 newsrooms in the Solutions Journalism Revenue Project (75%) generated \$1,494,625 in new revenue related to solutions journalism between 2019 and 2021.
    - a. Across the rest of the network, SJN news partners generated an additional \$1,205,590 tied to their solutions journalism in 2020.
    - b. For context, between 2013 and 2019, SJN tracked close to \$2 million generated in revenue connected to solutions journalism across its entire network.
    - c. There are a few reasons for this increase: 1) Before the revenue project, SJN wasn't thoroughly tracking revenue related to solutions journalism. 2) As more newsrooms pursue this approach to reporting, it is also becoming an integral part of pitches to financial backers. 3) Many were successful in applying for a range of COVID-19 emergency grants.
  - Importantly, most of the revenue raised by participants was to support operational costs and larger editorial projects, not just solutions journalism.
- While some say more evidence is needed to demonstrate effective strategies, participants in the SJRP cohort unanimously believe that solutions journalism can contribute to their ability to generate revenue.
- Six newsrooms (50%) reached the most advanced level of integration of solutions journalism, which means they covered a range of topics (rather than a single issue area) and leveraged their solutions reporting to increase revenue and/or engagement.
- All the SJRP cohort newsrooms report that they are "highly likely" to practice solutions journalism in the next year. In a survey filled out by 10 participants:
  - 100% said solutions journalism provided a way to help improve their communities.
  - 80% said solutions journalism was connected to audience engagement.
  - 70% said solutions journalism provided accountability.

# 2 About the Revenue Project

## Theory of Change

Since 2004, more than 1,800 local newspapers in the United States have gone out of business. At least 200 U.S. counties are without a newspaper. The collapse of local news, due mainly to the decline of advertising revenue, has been described as a national crisis and a threat to democracy.

Today, local news organizations, whether for-profit or not-for-profit, are adapting their business models by generating new types of revenue from a variety of stakeholders, including local institutions, businesses and, increasingly, readers in the communities they serve. To do this, local news organizations need to rebuild their relationships with their audiences and demonstrate anew the value of local news for their audience's and community's well-being. However, one of the major problems facing the news media today is the rise of "news avoidance," as audiences around the world increasingly reject the news because it makes them feel too depressed and powerless — and they are not sure it can be trusted.

In this context, SJN focuses its efforts on helping news organizations improve their business prospects by improving the news "product" itself — the kind of information the news provides. Over the past few years, a subset of SJN partners who did not participate in SJRP have found that by varying their coverage with solutions journalism — rigorous reporting that highlights credible responses and options to deal with challenges and problems — they can rebuild trust, increase engagement, drive impact and accountability, and attract new local sources of revenues.

## Revenue Project Overview

The Solutions Journalism Revenue Project (SJRP) pilot, which ran between February 2020 and February 2021, provided 12 local and regional newsroom partners with training, consultation and coaching in solutions journalism and business development.

Members of the cohort also shared experiences and advice with one another. The project's objectives were: 1) to assist partners in regularly producing high-quality solutions journalism stories and series; and 2) to develop revenue-building strategies linked to this coverage.

In addition to receiving training and coaching from SJN staff and industry experts, 10 newsrooms received grants (averaging \$8,000) to support solutions journalism projects, business experiments and fundraising appeals. Another two agreed to join the cohort without financial support.

## Outline of Project Phases

The first months of the project, Phase 1 (February - August 2020), aimed to equip newsrooms with the knowledge and skills to produce solutions journalism and to pursue new revenue opportunities. This phase focused on providing training, resources and advice to help editorial staff begin to deliver solutions journalism. For many newsrooms, this required learning or honing a relatively new editorial practice and identifying the coverage areas to which it could be applied.

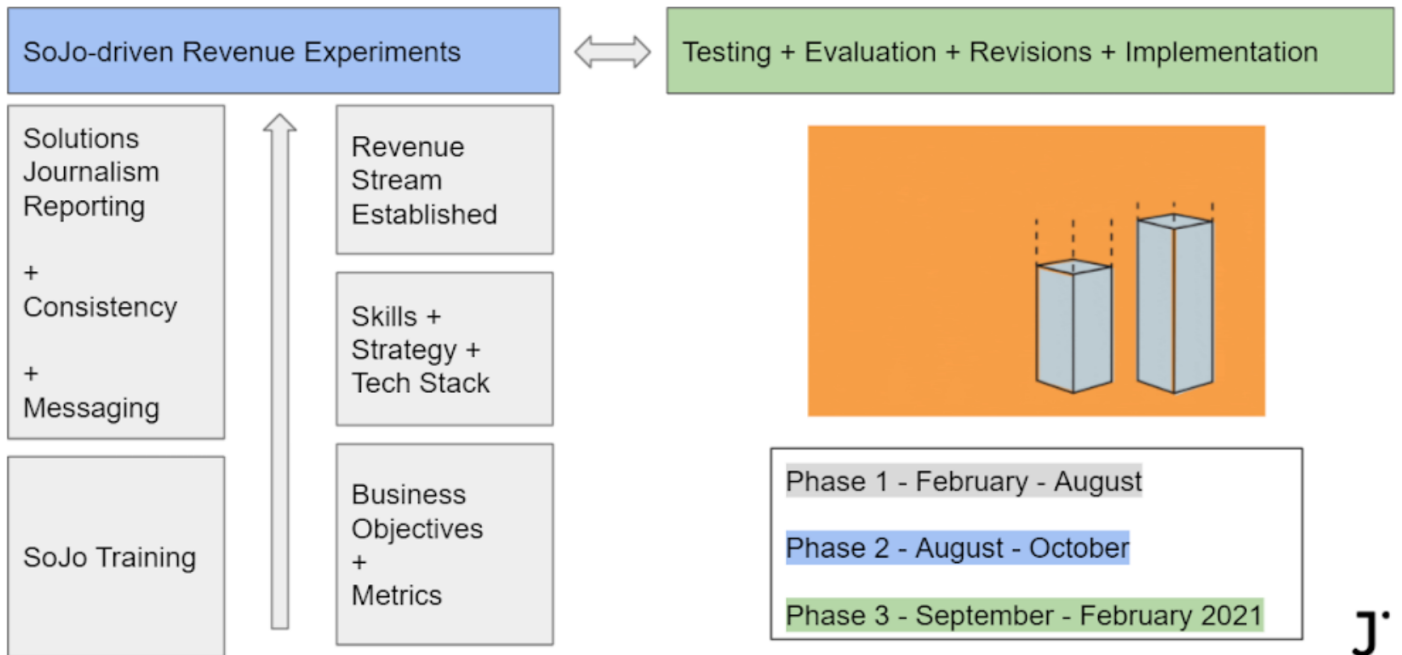
The business development training program offered strategies to help newsrooms refine their revenue generation plans. They also received specific coaching sessions during which newsroom-specific ideas for solutions journalism and revenue generation were discussed.

## SJRP Program in Numbers

- 11 newsrooms received solutions journalism training from SJN. One newsroom's training was canceled due to COVID-19 and replaced by a set of consultations with SJN staff.
- Seven newsrooms received additional training or story brainstorming sessions.
- In total, 66 people attended solutions journalism training sessions.
- 10 business development training sessions were offered.
- Eight newsrooms attended between 50% and 100% of all business development training sessions.
- Every other month, newsrooms participated in either a cohort meeting or a check-in with Alec Saelens, SJN's project lead, in addition to trainings.

Building on this foundational work, Phase 2 (August - October 2020) focused on providing assistance to newsrooms to help them: a) sustain their production of solutions-driven reporting; and b) develop infrastructure and strategies necessary to monetize their solutions work. Phase 3 (September 2020 - February 2021) focused on implementation and refinement of strategies. Overlapping phase periods account for asynchronous progress in the cohort.

# SJRP Building Blocks + Phases



## Cohort Overview

The participating news organizations were selected from over 100 applicants and came from 11 states. In our selection process, SJN prioritized partners that sought to expand coverage for the benefit of underserved communities, including communities of color and communities experiencing poverty. The cohort reflected a diversity of ownership models, editorial expertise, media platforms, demographics in leadership and communities served, and business practices.

- Seven serve urban and five serve rural audiences;
- Seven are led by women and five by men;
- Six are nonprofits, four are for-profit and two are owned by for-profit groups;
- 33% are led by people of color;
- Six are digital outlets, five are print and digital, and one is radio;
- 66% are newsrooms with fewer than 10 staff members.



Additionally:

- 100% of newsrooms (12) produced solutions journalism. Of those, 55% had never published solutions reporting before.
- 6Six newsrooms reached the most advanced level of integration of solutions journalism, which consists in covering a range of topics and using that coverage for revenue and/or engagement purposes. This is a very high rate of integration for a one-year period, and given the constraints of 2020, a very promising result.
- In total, approximately 52 pieces of solutions journalism content were published by the cohort. Ninety percent of grant-funded newsrooms produced at least three stories.
- Twice as many newsrooms (six) now have dedicated solutions journalism verticals on their websites (one in beta mode) than did when the SJRP was launched.

## 3 Solutions Journalism-Related Revenue

To identify and measure a connection between solutions journalism and the ability of newsrooms to generate revenue, SJN defined a clear set of metrics. Below are the criteria SJN used to determine whether revenue could be associated with a dollar amount for each revenue category:

Revenue Category	Criteria for SoJo connection
Grants	Reference to and commitment to producing solutions journalism in application, negotiations, and/or contract made
Major donor philanthropy	Donor made aware of intent to use money to support production of solutions journalism
Sponsorship/advertising	Reference to and commitment to producing solutions journalism in negotiations and/or contract with financial backer
Reader revenue (subscriptions, membership, small donations)	Readers became financial supporters after seeing a solutions story or a solutions-focused call to action in a newsletter or on social media

Based on information collected from all SJRP participants, eight of the 12 newsrooms (67%) generated \$1,319,625 in revenue related to solutions journalism between 2019 and 2021 as noted in the chart below.

Between 2013 and 2019, SJN tracked close to \$2 million generated in revenue connected to solutions journalism across its entire network; in 2020, the amount was \$1,205,590.

This provides concrete quantitative evidence that equipping newsrooms to leverage solutions journalism to develop new sources of revenue can contribute to their sustainability. Importantly, doing solutions journalism helped attract new revenue to support a newsroom's operational costs and larger editorial work, not just its solutions journalism.

"I think solutions journalism is appealing to basically every funder that I've worked with," said Lindsay Green-Barber, an evaluation consultant and founder of Impact Architects, who works with foundations in the journalism space. The approach holds particular appeal, she said, to "those who are coming from a programmatic lens or a local community-building lens." (Disclosure: SJN has previously contracted with Green-Barber.)

Year	Amount
All SJN Partners 2021 (year to date)	171,500
All SJN Partners 2020	1,205,590
SJRP Newsrooms 2019-21	1,494,625
All SJN Partners 2013-19	1,961,013
<b>Overall Amount</b>	<b>4,832,728</b>

*(Note: Revenue generated by solutions-oriented collaborative news hubs was not accounted for in these figures.)*

Newsrooms in SJRP and the wider SJN network have repeatedly shown that solutions journalism can help newsrooms generate revenue from a range of income streams.

Some newsrooms in the SJRP cohort expressed a desire to see more and deeper evidence of the link between solutions journalism and revenue before drawing conclusions about the consistency and immediacy of this connection, but all expressed confidence that publishing solutions journalism could lead to an increase in revenue.



## Grants and Donor Funding

A large majority of the solutions journalism-related revenue generated by newsrooms in SJRP and beyond comes from institutional funders. As noted above, it is especially promising that solutions journalism sits well alongside requests to fund operational costs and larger editorial projects. It is an incentive for newsrooms to do more solutions journalism and leverage it for fundraising. Equally noteworthy is that some funders explicitly asked that reporting projects be solutions-oriented.

In the case of the Midwest Center for Investigative Reporting, based in Champaign, Illinois, one of the newsroom's new funders approached it with a specific request that it include solutions-oriented coverage in the deliverables related to a grant for general support.

Lyndsey Gilpin, founder and editor-in-chief of Southerly, a small digital publication covering the American South, says solutions journalism is a reason why funders are interested in its work. Southerly received two grants that referred to its solutions journalism work, from the National Geographic Society (\$8,000) and the North Carolina Local News Lab fund (\$30,000). According to Gilpin, local funders are particularly interested in the potential impact of solutions reporting.

At Flint Beat in Michigan, Jiquanda Johnson, founder and publisher, told SJN that she includes solutions journalism in all proposals to funders. Ninety percent of Flint Beat's work is grant-funded, with at least \$276,525 secured in 2020. Johnson reported that one funder "said that including solutions as part of our proposal made our application stronger."

The Fresno Bee, a publication in California's San Joaquin Valley that is owned by the McClatchy group, launched a solutions-focused Education Lab in 2019. This project, modeled after the Seattle Times' Ed Lab and including a strong emphasis on solutions reporting, is funded by over a dozen philanthropic organizations and major donors from the region with an interest in advancing educational attainment and economic mobility. By February 2021, the Bee had attracted over \$700,000 in funding to support the work of several reporters and was continuing to raise funds to cover a third year of operation.

For Enlace Latino NC and WURD, solutions journalism was part of a broader pitch to funders seeking support for operational costs and editorial projects.

In New Hampshire, a couple of local foundations identified funding solutions journalism as a priority in order to support their wider missions. With one foundation starting in 2016, they provided seed funding to support newsrooms in producing solutions-focused projects and hiring dedicated reporters.

## Sponsorships

Two newsrooms in the SJRP cohort, The Current and The Community Voice, reached out to local businesses and foundations to secure underwriting for specific solutions reporting projects. They corroborated the potential for success of a strategy that two other newsrooms in the SJN network (Richland Source and Outride.rs) have deployed with positive results.

In 2020, The Current, a digital nonprofit publication in Lafayette, Louisiana, received \$8,500 in sponsorship from local businesses to support its coverage of Louisiana's developments in telehealth during the pandemic. The solutions journalism series "Lifeline: COVID" opened up an opportunity for The Current to secure financial support from two local healthcare providers in the form of sponsorships, while remaining completely editorially independent. The sponsors gave \$7,500 and \$1,000 for the project. Christiaan Mader, founder and executive editor, said, "They loved it," and added: "Our biggest sponsor leapt at the idea and asked us to create a [sponsorship] level 50% higher than what we tried to sell. That wouldn't have happened with a typical investigative project, especially in this [media] market." The sponsor came on board explicitly because of the solutions focus. Mader said, "A solutions brand smooths that edge for sponsors who nonetheless want to support robust journalism."

The Community Voice in Wichita, Kansas, which serves the African-American community, created a solutions-driven reporting project called "The Criminalization of Poverty." In an introduction to the project and in letters to potential sponsors, the Voice explained, "We're looking for solutions that work." In the first and only fundraising round in July 2020, the publication raised \$5,000 in sponsorship for the project from two private businesses and a local philanthropic foundation.

Both organizations added that receiving sponsorship money for solutions journalism was a proof of concept they would seek to replicate and expand upon in the future.

In 2019 Outride.rs, the Poland-based publication covering global issues, generated \$8,000 in sponsorship revenue from the bank Santander to support a solutions-driven reporting package. The project, called #WeHaveCommonGoals, involved a community engagement aspect designed to crowdsource ideas for the article topics. Jakub Górnicki, CEO of Outride.rs, told SJN that pitching a solutions journalism project to a business increases chances of success. In this instance the bank was interested in supporting work that would

help “promote the UN Sustainable Development Goals”, without interfering with the publication’s journalism. In a statement Santander stated, “The journalist conducts research, compares various approaches to the issue and finally presents to the readers an accurate picture of the situation, telling them how different solutions work and what impact they have in various places worldwide.”

There is a clear advantage to putting forward a pitch anchored in solutions journalism. Businesses, whether small and local or much larger, tend to want to support rigorous reporting that elevates the evidence that underpins responses to issues affecting the communities they are embedded in or aiming to serve.

Sponsorship also offers a relatively cost-effective way to generate revenue, requiring less effort than applying for competitive grants. It typically requires simple documentation that can be presented to potential sponsors to open up a conversation.

## Reader Revenue

Identifying reader revenue connected to solutions journalism is technically challenging for newsrooms, as it requires a relatively sophisticated digital infrastructure and time investment. Evidence of reader revenue generated by the cohort has been anecdotal.

David Haynes, Ideas Lab editor at the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, provided data for solutions journalism stories produced in 2020. On average, solutions articles performed up to 50% better than the sitewide average in converting a reader into a subscriber. Haynes notes that a few factors influence this performance, including timeliness, headline selection, social media activity and how the stories are displayed on the website, but it appears solutions-oriented pieces do relatively well at converting readers to subscribers for the Journal Sentinel.

Outside of the SJRP, some newsrooms have had significant success promoting solutions journalism to attract reader support. Jay Allred, publisher of Richland Source, told SJN, “We assign a great deal of our membership growth to SoJo because it is a crucial driver in every way that we explain ourselves to our readers.” In 2020, the publication, which has a dedicated solutions journalism vertical on its website, generated \$73,000 in revenue from its individual members.

While most newsrooms in the SJRP cohort established that solutions-oriented content is of high value for their brand and performs better, on average, than other forms of reporting, few have had sufficient resources to invest in producing enough of this kind of reporting to develop reader revenue strategies around it.

However, existing research shows the significant appeal of solutions journalism for audiences. An upcoming study of audience data from a dozen newsrooms highlights solutions journalism's influence on audience loyalty and engagement, showing the potential for turning solutions journalism into an editorial product that can prompt readers to open their wallets.

## 4 Conclusion

The past year offered SJN the opportunity to explore whether solutions journalism could help newsrooms grow towards financial sustainability and how to go about it. The results are positive and encouraging.

As the practice of reporting on responses to problems becomes more widespread and media organizations become increasingly comfortable embracing it in their fundraising and marketing, we believe a range of stakeholders will step up to support their work, with a focus on, but not limited to, solutions journalism.

While developing these strategies will take time and depend on many other factors shaping the industry, we highlighted several newsrooms in this report that are paving the way for others by making solutions reporting a cornerstone of their editorial, fundraising and community engagement efforts.

Over the next year, SJN will continue to provide support to newsrooms seeking to advance solutions reporting as an integral part of their journalism and business development.

