

ISOJ 2020: Day 3

From problems to solutions: How solutions journalism can shift and shape media coverage

Chair: [Mallory Tenore](#), associate director, **Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas**

- [Dahlia Bazzaz](#), Education Lab reporter, **Seattle Times**
 - [Tina Rosenberg](#), co-founder and vice president of innovation, **Solutions Journalism Network (SJN)**
 - [Brittany Schock](#), engagement and solutions editor, **Richland Source**
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Rosental Alves Howdy. Thank you very much for joining us for the last panel of the third day of ISOJ online. It has been a fantastic, very intense day. Since the morning with Emily and Amanda talking about the 19th. Then we had a spectacular workshop on TikTok for journalists. And then we had this this fantastic panel on journalists being attacked by presidents in Brazil, Poland, Mexico and Hungary. It has been really, really a great day. And what a great way to end the day as we will be talking about solutions, the movement of solutions. Solutions journalism has been growing everywhere, so I'm very happy to have this panel.

Now, before we get started, just a few housekeeping reminders. The panel's keynote sessions and workshops will all be interpreted to Spanish. If you would like to join and watch in Spanish on Zoom, you have to use the interpretation globe down below in the Zoom screen and select the Spanish-language channel. Please also note that we are live streaming on the ISOJ and Knight center YouTube channels in English and Spanish. In case you have any problem with Zoom and want to go to YouTube, you can also go to ISOJ.org, where we have the links. We also have a tech helpline via WhatsApp or text, so if you have any other problem, you can send a message to 1817-526-0179. Also, please remember to follow and to use the #ISOJ2020 hashtag. Please tweet because we are having less tweets in the online version of ISOJ, much less than we normally have when we do the conference here in Austin, Texas.

And so now I would like to introduce you to the panelists, Mallory Tenore, Dahlia Bazzaz, Tina Rosenberg and Brittany Schock. I'm going to pass now to Mallory, who is the associate director of the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas and has been my my right arm here. All right, Mallory, you now.

Mallory Tenore I'm pleased to be moderating this panel with my solutions journalism colleagues, Tina Rosenberg from the Solutions Journalism Network, Brittany Schock from Richland Source and Dahlia Bazzaz from the Seattle Times. Together we'll explore what solutions journalism is and isn't, how newsrooms are embracing it, and how this type of storytelling can deepen trust and community engagement. We'll also share research that paints a bigger picture of why solutions journalism matters.

I've been a proponent of solutions journalism for many years because I believe it's a critical complement to the way that journalists have traditionally approached storytelling.

We were trained to uncover problems and corruption to dig deep into what's not working. This type of coverage is important. It helps to expose wrongdoings, holds the powerful accountable, and helps inform people's actions and decisions. But this coverage needs a companion, one that moves the story forward by focusing not on problems but on solutions. Solutions journalism seems especially relevant at this moment in time, marked by a global pandemic and a nationwide reckoning over systematic racism. The solutions stories I've read about these topics have focused on promising practices in different communities. They explore not just what communities and individuals are doing to rectify an issue, but how they're doing it. They're scalable, solutions-based stories help people solve problems. And when acted on, they can be vital for social progress. These stories, in effect, shine a light on what's working in an otherwise dark time. They aren't fluff pieces. They're rigorously reported, evidence-based stories that shift the narrative from brokenness to repair. They matter.

So with that, I want to turn the conversation over to Tina Rosenberg, co-founder and vice president of innovation at the Solutions Journalism Network. Tina and her team at SJN have been at the forefront of developing the solutions journalism genre and training journalists on how to tell these stories. Thank you so much for being here with us today, Tina.

Tina Rosenberg It's my pleasure to be here, Mallery, and that was a fantastic introduction. Thank you so much for that. You really summed it up. And it's great to be here with Brittany and Dahlia, who are from the news organizations that are stalwart pioneers of solutions journalism, and I can't wait to hear what they have to say.

So I'd like to start out with a story. This is from the Cleveland Plain Dealer, the late lamented Cleveland Plain Dealer. It's a series that they did about lead paint, which is a very big problem in Cleveland. Now, it's not the first series they did about lead. They had done several in the past. You can read what Brie Zeltner, one of the co writers of the series, said about past series. She said that they produced some blah, blah, blah from politicians, but not much of anything else. So this time the Solutions Journalism Network worked with The Plain Dealer to do a new kind of series. It did have a traditional investigative component, and you can see that. And it's looking at lead paint distribution by zip code, which was basically looking at it through the lens of race. But it also had something else. And this is something else, the solutions component, took a problem that had been dismissed by authorities as unavoidable, and turned it into a problem that was unacceptable.

And it did that by showing what, as this note from George Rodrigue, the executive editor, said, we're going to show you what our neighboring cities are doing about lead that's working better than what we're doing, and what the obstacles are that are keeping us from doing those in Cleveland. So taking away the excuses of Cleveland because its neighbors are doing a better job.

So what did they do? They did stories like this one on Rochester, New York, which had an overall better approach to lead that was having some success. And this is interesting, they took little bite size pieces of the problem. For example, creating a registry of houses with lead, proactively treating school children. And they looked at various cities around the Midwest, like Grand Rapids and Akron, that were doing these little bites things, and what success they were having. They even published a chart in the paper. I love this. It said, "Here's what successful cities do. And here's what Cleveland does." You can imagine how

profoundly embarrassing this was to public officials in a way that simply writing about the problem was not.

And this series had a huge impact. It had an immediate impact in terms of an increased budget and staff for the people working on lead, and the city adopted many of the best practices of its neighbors. And then finally, years later, the city council passed a law that was an historic overhaul of how lead was treated in Cleveland. So huge impact from the series, and it would not have had it without the solutions component.

So, as Mallery said, I am co-founder of the Solutions Journalism Network. We are an NGO. We are seven years old. And our job is to work with newsrooms and journalists to show them how to do stories on solutions in a way that uses high journalistic standards and ethical practices. So how do you do it without fluff, without cheerleading, without advocacy?

On our website, we have a bunch of tools like this learning lab in various languages and more advanced learning labs for editors, for engagement, et cetera. Here are some of the advanced ones. And one tool that I really love is our solution story tracker. We collect solutions journalism. We vet it. We tag it. We make it searchable, and we summarize it. And here's the database. It has now over 9,500 stories in it, and you can search by any kinds of things you want. And you can see the various ways you can search by location, by topic, by the secret sauce of what this intervention did, by the kind of platform for journalism it was. So it's a fantastic tool for any journalist.

So what is solutions journalism? How do we define it? So this was the first story. Dahlia, I'm not sure you've ever seen this published by Ed Lab, which is where you work at the Seattle Times. And it was about a school that had done very poorly on standardized exams, and over the course of a short period of time, greatly improved. And the last line in the caption, I'm not sure you can read it is, "So what went on here, and can this be replicated?" And that's a key thought in solutions journalism.

Now, a lot of the ways we define solutions journalism are through what it is not. So here are some things that people think SO-JO is, but that's not how we define it. So many of the things that it isn't, let's start with silver bullet. These are stories that say, "Oh, the problem is now solved." And instead of doing silver bullet stories, you should do stories that explore what is working and what is not working about the response. You're not celebrating it. You're covering it with the usual journalistic rigor. So these are "hero worship" stories. These are stories about special people, perhaps because they're extraordinarily generous or selfless, but they're not really interested in the effects of the work. And real solutions journalism is interested in what's the evidence of success here? What's the evidence of impact? They use stories of people, but they use it to tell the story of the work. So these are PR stories, "favor for a friend." Real solutions journalism actually explores in depth what is working and what is not working. This is a slightly more subtle distinction. A "think tank" story, which is not what we're talking about, is a story that says, "Here's how I think we should solve this problem." It's the reporter making a proposal for the future. Real solutions journalism, by contrast, instead says, "Here's how someone is attempting to solve the problem, and I'm going to cover that and look at how well it's going." It's the difference between theoretical on one side and practical on-the-ground reporting in the other. If there's nothing going on that you can report on, you cannot do solutions journalism. So "afterthought" stories. These are stories that are largely about problems, but may spend the last paragraph, or two paragraphs, or the last few minutes of a documentary saying, "Oh, and by the way, all is not lost. There are some people working

on trying to solve this problem." But they don't go into any depth about the solutions. It's almost like they're added because we've just decided we can't leave you guys on such a downer. So "instant activists" are stories that tell the audience how you can become part of the solution. Some news organizations are comfortable with that. Some are not. But that's not what solutions journalism is. Solutions journalism is just straight reporting. It's covering the news. And finally, my favorite, our house mascot, Chris P Bacon. This is a fun story about human nature, and this wonderful man who built the little wheelchair for his pig. I don't even know why people think this is solutions journalism. Because it makes you feel good, I guess, about the human condition. But a solution journalism story has to have not just inspiration, but insight. It has to tell you things so that you, too, could do them in order to solve this problem.

So here are the four qualities of what a solutions journalism story is. First of all, it's about the work. It may feature people, but the real hero of the story is the response to the problem and how it was done. Second of all, it's interested in what evidence we have of effectiveness. And you tell us what we have and what we know. And if there isn't any but is still a good story, tell us that. You have to justify why you're writing it. There may not be any evidence because it may be really new, but you can tell us that. Third of all, it has to have not just inspiration, but insight, important information for society. And very important, fourth, it looks at what are the limitations of the response. It is not a puff piece. It is covering it with journalistic rigor.

I'd like to move on to the question of why we should consider using solutions journalism when appropriate. OK, first of all, because it is just good journalism. It can help you tell the whole story. So this is journalism's "theory of change," the way journalists see it. We will expose wrongdoing. Then someone will come and swoop in, maybe from Mars, and change things. I'm not that happy with how well that works most of the time, and one of the reasons is that to make changes, we have to not only know there's a problem, but we have to know that it's possible to do better. And that's the part that journalists have been leaving out. The first piece I ever did that was solutions journalism was 20 years ago now. In the year 2000, I was working for the Sunday magazine of The New York Times, and I proposed to my editor an investigative piece on the price of AIDS drugs in poor countries. And the fact was that Washington was colluding with the pharmaceutical industry to put political pressure on countries so they would not make or buy cheap generic versions of drugs. And that meant that the prices of AIDS drugs were completely out of reach in most poor countries where the AIDS burden was the highest. So I proposed this to my editor and he said, "No, too depressing. And everybody knows that everyone with AIDS is going to die in Malawi." So I went home, and I rethought it. And I turned it inside out. There was one country that was defying this pressure and telling Washington to, "go to hell," and making generics, and giving them for free to all their people. And that was Brazil. So the story became what Brazil was doing to be able to save its people. And in the course of that, I could say everything I wanted to say about what the country had to fight off and how other countries were unable to withstand that pressure. It was a much better story this way. It was fresher. It was more exciting for people. It had a lot more impact because it showed it was possible to do better. And that to me showed me the power of solutions journalism.

Solution journalism allows you to tell the whole story, the complete story, which we are leaving out. I bet all of you knew about the Ebola epidemic in 2014 in West Africa. But how many of you knew that in the countries right next door to the ones most affected, like Mali, Nigeria and Senegal, they had small caseload in the single or double digits, and they were able to control them? How did they do that? Did everybody know that there's a vaccine for

Ebola now that works 100% of the time? Do people know that there's a cure for Ebola now? There is. And yet billions of people knew about the Ebola epidemic, and my guess is that a couple of thousand people know about these other things. And that's an imbalance we need to correct. So if you do that, you're depriving society of critical information we need. I love this cartoon from The New Yorker. I'll let you read it. (Shows cartoon.) And that's what journalism is today.

So it can help you engage and attract audience. The American Press Institute looked at the impact of the Seattle Times education lab stories compared to traditional stories, and they found these differences. More than double the page views, almost double the time on page, more than triple the social shares. This is a vertical in The Guardian called The Upside, where one in 10 readers shares a story on social media. That's a high percentage. This video from the Fixes column was the most shared video on the New York Times website in 2017. We know from a lot of research that by far the biggest reason people tune out from the news is that it's really depressing. It makes them feel hopeless and powerless. But you tune back in when you think there's something that can be done.

One of the other things that's very important now is that solutions journalism helps to increase trust. Any marginalized or excluded community feels that it is covered by the mainstream media solely through the lens of their worst stereotype. If you go knock on the door in the south side of Chicago, everyone there knows that you're there to ask about gun violence. If you're the New York Times reporter and you go reporting in Alabama, people know you're looking for the people with four teeth. And that is unfair. It is prejudicial. And that is one reason that people in those communities feel like they're being covered for the benefit of a wide audience, and why people don't trust journalists. It also helps to reduce the trust that we have in each other in society.

And the last point I want to make is that we have many partners that use solutions journalism to produce revenue, and two of them are about to talk to you. So I will see the floor to Brittany and Dahlia, so they can talk about their own projects. Thank you.

Mallory Tenore OK, well, thank you so much, Tina. I really like how you talked about the fact that journalistic rigor is critical when you're telling solution stories, and the fact that the hero of solutions stories is the response to the problem and how it was done. And I also liked that you talked about the solutionsStory tracker, because I really do think that that's a great resource for anyone who's wanting to see practical and international examples of how solutions journalism can play out. So thank you for that.

So I'd like to turn the conversation over now to Brittany Schock, who is the engagement and solutions editor at the Richland Source. The Richland Source is a small news organization in Mansfield, Ohio, that has really embraced solutions journalism and shown how it can be an integral part in the newsroom's coverage, and not just an afterthought. Brittany, we're delighted to have you here today.

Thanks. I'm so excited to be here. Tina is a hard act to follow. But it's so funny. We've been doing solutions journalism for years now, and I never get tired of hearing that presentation. It's kind of like going to church. You know, what they're going to say, but like you're inspired all the same. So I'm glad that you got to go first.

Brittany Schock So like Mallory said, my name is Brittany Schock. I'm the engagement and solutions editor with the Richland Source. We're located in Mansfield, Ohio. And over the last four years, I've done a lot of solutions journalism. And I'm hoping to share with you

today some of the lessons that I've learned in hopes that you'll be able to practice solutions journalism, no matter how big or small your newsroom is.

So a little about Richland Source first. This was kind of our mission statement, if you'd asked us about it three years ago, I would say. And as you can see, we always wanted to do things a little bit differently than the "if it bleeds, it leads" mantra of normal journalism, I guess you could say. And if you look at our values well, you'll see that "look for solutions" is baked right into it. Fast forward to today. This is a much more refined mission statement for Richland Source. And you'll notice a key phrase in here that practitioners of solutions journalism will recognize, which is "effective responses to problems." Because that is the essence of solutions journalism, not finding the silver bullet solutions that Tina referenced, but telling the stories of other people who are doing the work.

So you might be wondering, how do we get from one mission statement to the other? We are kind of practicing solutions journalism before we even knew it had a name. But I would say the major shift came with a story that I wrote back in 2016. So I did a series on infant mortality called "Healing Hope," which covered the infant mortality rates in Richland County, the problem of why infant mortality rates were so high, and some of the solutions that were happening within our county and around the world. We knew right off the bat that we wanted to look for a problem in our community and tackle that problem through our journalism. And we found an alarming statistic about infant mortality rates in Richland County, and then I was off to the races. I published a three-part series in 2016, addressing infant mortality in Richland County and beyond. It took me about six months to complete this project. When you think about all the interviews and research I had to do, plus balancing all of the normal journalism work like ribbon cuttings and breaking news that I was doing at the same time. But after that story published in September of 2016, people started talking. They started taking notice of that story. Eventually, one of the solutions that I reported on in that series became a reality in Richland County, when baby boxes were implemented about six months after the story published. And that was a huge thing for me to see, you know, real life action happening because of a story I had written.

And then we have the community baby shower, which I have to say is probably the thing I get asked about the most. So a year after the series published, we held an engagement event with the assistance of a grant from the Solutions Journalism Network that really brought the community together. As you can see, we had 20 different community organizations there. We had 500 people in our newsroom. It was crazy, I have to say. But that's how we knew. That was a signal to us that there was an appetite for this kind of work in our community. And that's when we really started thinking solutions journalism is probably something that we should be focusing on.

So a little background to this. Richland Source brings in revenue through memberships. We have three different tiers of membership. And we started asking our members, "Why do you support us? Why do you decide to give us your dollars?" And I'll give you a hint. None of them said it was because of free coffee mugs and pens. They truly valued the work that we do, and they especially valued solutions journalism. They didn't always know that was the word to call it, but they appreciated the fact that we were doing stories about elderly issues, about the economy, about food deserts. And we were showing, like Tina said, that the problem doesn't end there. Like the story doesn't end with the problem. There's more to it. We're telling the whole story. And like I said, they didn't always know it was called solution journalism, but the community was signaling to us, "Yes, we value this."

So we started making solutions journalism a priority in our content. If you go to our site, RichlandSource.com/Solutions, you can see that we created a section on our site, especially devoted to solutions journalism. All the stories we publish having to do with solutions journalism end up there. So you can see, it shows on our site, "Hello. We really value this." And then we created my position as engagement and solutions editor about a year and a half ago as a signal both internally and externally that this was going to be a focus of our company moving forward. We publish at least one solutions-oriented article per month, which is, I got to say, a far cry from the year-long projects we used to do. It used to take us like the last one we did was probably a year and a half. So we really had to learn how to do solutions journalism much quicker. And to do that, it was all about time management, first of all. As a reporter, you have to learn to manage your time, and you hear that over and over again. But it also is about time management as a priority with your leadership. And that was part of my position, was being able to say, "Yeah, it's OK to take some time or take a day in the week to focus on research for this project. You might not produce a byline that day, but we know that solutions work is important. And we're going to give you time to do this." It also comes down to understanding the core of what a solution story is, which, as we've said over and over again, is rigorous reporting to a response of a problem. And knowing that that doesn't mean a big, long six-months project. As long as you have that element in your story, you can do pretty quick turnarounds.

We've also been very transparent about our work and solutions journalism to our community. If you go to our membership website, which is sourcemembers.com, you can see that we have a section called Annual Report. With the help of the local design agency, we created this 2019 annual report of our solutions work for the community, showing this is what we did for the year. This is how we spent your membership dollars. And we learned, most importantly I think, that we could sell solutions journalism, which sounds icky, but I promise it's not. We were able to approach businesses and our community to say, "We know that you support this work. We need your support to be able to keep doing it." And we're able to sell that by saying, "You don't get to preread the stories. You don't get a say in what stories we write or what direction we go. But this kind of work takes funding, and if you value it, then we need your help." And they actually did. So we're able to sell sponsorships directly tied to our solutions journalism work. The first year we raised about \$70,000 within our community. This year, we actually doubled that amount.

So, like I said, it was a signal that the appetite is there in the community to say, "We value this work. We want you to keep doing this work, and we know that you need our dollars to support it." The reason that we're able to keep doing this is because we keep delivering. We keep producing those stories. We keep delivering on our mission statement. Our community supports us because of this content. And they've told us time and time again, either through words. When people become members, we ask them at that purchase point, "Why did you buy a membership?" Over and over it's because they say, "We value the work that you're doing." So they tell us with their words, and they tell us what their dollars. We had to be really good at learning to tell our own story too, to be able to signal to our community, this is important to us. This is important for you, for us to be doing this work, and thank you for supporting it.

And that's all I've got for you. So this is my contact information if anyone wants to follow up with me to ask more questions, and that's my Twitter handle and my email. I would love to hear from any of you.

Mallory Tenore Great. Thank you so much, Brittany. I love hearing about the Richland Source's mission statement. I think that it's really interesting to see how that developed

and evolved. And so it's cool to think about mission statements, being these living, breathing documents that can change depending on what our audiences' needs are and the types of stories we want to tell. And I think a lot of times when we talk about doing this sort of important in-depth storytelling, we look to large news organizations that have a lot of resources, and we sort of look to them to see how they did it. But it's refreshing to hear best practices from a small local news organization like yours, because I think it shows that journalists anywhere, regardless of the size of their publication, can do good solutions journalism. So, thank you.

So I want to turn the conversation over now to Dahlia Bazzaz, who is a reporter at the Seattle Times's Education Lab, which I think is a model of excellence for how solutions journalism can be applied to education reporting and other beats, for that matter. So Dahlia has some interesting details to share about how solutions journalism can foster community engagement. So welcome, Dahlia.

Dahlia Bazzaz Thank you so much for having me. These two presentations have been awesome, and my presentation is going to touch on a lot of elements that Tina and Brittany just touched on. But I'll share a little bit more about how we use the solutions lens to investigate public education problems, and also tell you a little bit about my journey to becoming a believer in solutions journalism.

So, again, my name is Dahlia Bazzaz. I'm an education reporter for the Seattle Times Education Lab. At Education Lab, we focus on Seattle-area schools and statewide policy, but our reporting takes us all over the world. We are a team of three reporters and an engagement editor, and we're focused on public education solutions to long-standing problems, so to poverty, racism, ableism, any number of issues. Our goal is to create a new conversation that connects teachers, parents and students around innovation in schools. And one of the, I think, landmark things about Education Lab is its focus on community engagement. And I think it's a defining feature that really sold me on the concept of solutions journalism, marrying those two concepts. We do events, we do storytelling nights, and we host debates about the things that we cover.

The way that I got indoctrinated into all of this was four years ago I was fresh out of college, and I was searching for a job. And I applied for a news producer position at the Seattle Times, and I didn't get it. And a few days later, I got a call from one of the managing editors, and she told me about this open engagement editor position for Education Lab and told me to apply. So I did, and I had no prior background in covering K-12 public schools, nor any knowledge of what solutions journalism was. And I got the job, and I had major imposter syndrome. This job required me to be the public face of my team, to create events and facilitate conversation about these really complicated problems. And my first big project was to put on this annual event for hundreds of people right in the middle of downtown Seattle, and it was called Ignite Education Lab. And it's a storytelling hour for people to speak about their experiences in school. So for example, we had teachers come in and talk about practices in their classroom that changed their lives. Students would come in and talk about teachers who changed their lives. And it was supposed to be sort of this informal night where people could just speak about how public education had influenced their lives. And I pictured row after row of empty seats, heckling, like every worst case scenario. I didn't know how many people were going to show up. And to my great surprise, the whole event was packed, and I think a lot of it had to do with the reputation that Education Lab had garnered over the years. We've been in shop since 2013, and many of the folks who had showed up had been coming to a lot of events for years. As I was greeting them, they were listing the stories that they liked from us, and the

names of the reporters on the teams. They brought friends and close family members. And these are not always public education nerds either. These are folks who are just concerned about public schools and subscribers to the paper. And I think that community trust element that Tina was talking about is really true. And I found this to be true just a couple of months into my job. I can't tell you how many times I hear the phrase, "I don't typically trust the news" or "I don't trust Seattle Times, but I trust Education Lab."

So what does solutions journalism mean to us? One of my former coworkers, Claudia Rowe, who wrote a lot of our amazing solution journalism pieces for Ed Lab, she describes it, "as hope with teeth." And I think that's a beautiful way to think about it. We set up the problem. We search for a research-backed solution to the problem, and then we look under the hood of that solution. We poke and we prod, and we find its weaknesses and strengths. And we bring it into context.

So here's some examples of how we use the lens at Education Lab. So last year, one of our reporters, Neal Morton, went to Australia in a city called Geelong. And this was sort of a shot in the dark. Neal didn't know. He was going to pitch it to our editor. He was fully expecting to get his pitch rejected. But lo and behold, a bunch of school districts in King County, which is the county that encompasses the Seattle area, had been looking at a way to intervene in student homelessness, and that's a huge issue both in the Seattle area and in districts across the country. And so Neal went to Geelong, Australia, where this approach had originated, to look at this system. And this chart here perfectly exemplifies looking under the hood for a process that they use to identify kids at risk of being homeless. And then the greatest challenge with this story for Neal was to bring it back home. What lessons could it offer for us here? And Australia's very far away. It has a different government system and very different demographics. And like any good solutions piece, it was really honest about the limitations. In the U.S., for example, our systems, especially our systems outside of public education, are set up to react really late in the game for child poverty. After a student is already couch surfing. So the story acknowledged those dynamics, but still posed some of the simple practices that school officials could engage in to check on their students regularly and make sure that they were getting their needs met.

Another example is the Advanced Placement, or Gifted Education, series that Claudia Rowe had worked on. In 2017, she followed up a piece about racial disproportionality in classes designed for quote unquote "gifted students," and examined two approaches that managed to improve the diversity of gifted education classes. One was locally in a district a few miles south of Seattle called Federal Way, and the other one was in Miami. She found that in Federal Way, the classes got more diverse when they began automatically opting kids into AP classes and advanced classes. But like any good solutions reporter, she followed up and found that there wasn't any improvement in academic performance. So in other words, the kids weren't getting the support they needed to thrive in those environments after they were automatically funneled into them. So that was a lesson from that approach. And then in Miami, which has been praised around the country for its model, Claudia looked in at a law in Florida that allows school districts to be more flexible with how they test students or screen students for giftedness. So, for example, kids whose primary language isn't English could take a different sort of cognitive screening that could measure more than just their verbal skills. After the series ran, the state actually began requiring school districts to submit plans for how they were going to find new gifted kids.

So what do we see as the benefits of solutions journalism in our work and in general? There are a few ways. The first is that it redirects the conversation away from the problem

to the solution, which just means that it's way easier to talk about the problems in a levelheaded way. This is true for both story writing and other initiatives that we put on. When we create events that gather different stakeholders about education for students with disabilities, for example, we try to redirect the conversation away from all of the intractable problems into conversations about policy solutions. And we bring in people who are actually working on the problem and want to make the issue better, and we make sure that we include people on every side of this issue. So the students themselves, the teachers, the district officials, policymakers, everyone that has a stake in this. We also encourage students to contribute guest essays that use this same lens. Tina focused on this a lot, and I'm just going to touch on it briefly. It increases accountability. So we have a longstanding problem across so many different school districts. Let's say racism in schools or poor outcomes for students with disabilities. It's very easy for people in power to dismiss the issue as universal, or they throw up their hands and say, "There's nothing that we can do." The solutions journalism lens puts the answer out there so that you can start asking sharper and more exact questions about what could be done. Did you see what happened in this other district? Are you considering doing this as well? So it gives you more firepower in your actual questions. And I think the best investigations have elements of solutions journalism in them.

Again, this is another principle that Tina touched on, but it increases reader trust and fights compassion fatigue. I've heard many people reference this compassion fatigue, psychological phenomenon in relationship to solutions journalism. People do get desensitized or tired of negative stories all the time. And in Washington state, for example, right as Education Lab was created, we had a huge state Supreme Court ruling that ended up flipping the way that we fund schools in Washington state. And year after year after year, people have been hearing about how we inequitably fund public schools. And our reporting helped cast a light on how other states were approaching this problem, instead of saying over and over again that Washington gives half as much money for X district as opposed to Y district.

And then the last thing that I've discovered about this approach is that it helps sources open up more. Journalists will know that people in high up or official positions can be cagey about addressing problems that have happened under their watch. As someone who alternates between the traditional and solutions lens, I've seen the differences in how officials react to each lens, and it's really night and day. So in my traditional beat reporting role, I cover the Puget Sound region school districts, and I often metaphorically get the door slammed in my face when I try to get comment from school district officials about a crisis. And especially if I'm asking any questions about race, or racism, or systemic inequality, it is very, very hard to pry people. But when I did a series on the ways that school districts were successfully trying to add more racial diversity to their teaching staffs, I got invited into more offices, and people seemed much more willing to discuss the problems they encountered when they tried to execute a solution. I wrote about programs that districts were creating that helped grow teachers' aides, many of whom are of color into certificated teachers. The city of Seattle later allocated money from one of its levies to help the district expand and build upon the program that I had highlighted. And then this email up here from a district human resources leader that I spoke to for the story. It seems really benign. It seems like a simple note. But I'm telling you, I rarely get this type of message from a high-up school district official, without a PR person CC'd on it. Some of the sources I spoke to for this series are some of my most reliable, and I think it's because they felt I took the time to investigate not only their problems, but their strengths.

Mallory Tenore Great. Thank you so much, Dahlia. That was wonderful. I love the idea of redirecting the conversation, both in terms of the way that we talk about stories that we tell, but also in terms of how we approach sources with the stories that we're telling. I think if we can go to sources and say, "this is a story that looks at the solutions," then as part of that reporting and interviewing process, the problems become more evident. And so solutions journalism isn't about ignoring problems, right? I mean, you have to address those problems, but it is about sort of moving that story forward. And I've often thought about how solutions journalism offers up hope. But I love what you said about "hope with teeth." I'm going to have to keep that just in my lingo when I go about describing solutions journalism. So thank you so much. It's been wonderful hearing all three of you talk about solutions journalism and the ways in which it can be applied to our coverage, keeping in mind that it doesn't have to be reserved for these big long-term projects that take six months or however long. But really, it can be an integral part of the way we approach so many of our stories, and they can be quicker turn around pieces and pieces that are more accessible. So thank you.

And I want to now turn it over to more of a Q&A. So I'm going to go ahead and ask you all some questions, and then we'll also take some questions for the audience.

Great. Well, thank you. Here we are again. It's so nice to see all of you, and I loved hearing you talk about your work in solutions journalism. And so I'm going to be asking you some questions and also sharing some questions from the audience. So those of you in attendance, I encourage you to continue asking questions. We'll do our best to get to as many as we can in the next half hour or so.

So I think that it's really important that we're having this conversation at this moment in time, right? Because so many of the headlines that we see dominating the news today are about problems related to the pandemic, and racial injustice, and other issues. And so there have been some studies, including one by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, that show that this surge in news about the coronavirus has led to a significant increase in news avoidance in the U.K. and in other countries. And this comes as no surprise to us and to many journalists because research has shown for years that repeated exposure to dramatic news can cause acute stress symptoms, and trigger flashbacks, and encourage fear mongering. And really, you know, they can leave people feeling kind of hopeless and helpless. Right. So I think this moment in time creates a real opening for solutions journalism.

And I was reminded of this recently when I was listening to a webinar in which Mark Rice-Oxley from The Guardian said that he thinks the coronavirus has, quote, "turbo-charged solutions journalism." And I really liked that quote. So with that in mind, I want to ask you, why do you think solutions journalism is important in this moment in time? And how are you seeing it play out in newsrooms?

Tina Rosenberg Well, I think one reason it's important is a pretty obvious reason, which is that every single community in the world is facing exactly the same problem with regard to COVID. So these are problems that everyone shares, and therefore many, many different communities are working on them. And some of those responses that they're coming up with are going to be successful, and interesting, and worth sharing. We are desperate to learn what is working from others. So that's one reason why solutions journalism is very important right now. I think the other is what you mentioned, which is people's mental state. The CDC has warned us to not consume so much news. It's bad for our health. And so taking a break, and consuming some solutions journalism can be better for our health.

Mallary Tenore Yeah, that makes a whole lot of sense, and it can really be sort of this critical counterpoint, and this other way of looking at stories. Dahlia and Brittany, did you have anything you wanted to add to that question?

Brittany Schock I actually pulled up the solution story tracker that Tina mentioned in her presentation, which if you guys don't know, its storytracker.solutionsjournalism.org. And if you search for the word COVID, there are actually 431 stories related to COVID-19 in the solutions tracker right now, which shocked me, to be honest. I didn't know there were that many. And to me, that's very helpful to know that in this huge, seemingly unsolvable problem that we're all in right now, and it can feel so overwhelming and so hopeless sometimes, to know that there are solutions out there. I mean, I think Tina hit it on the nose. It's exactly about mental health and knowing that there are people out there working on things, and there is a light at the end of the tunnel. I think that's so important.

Dahlia Bazzaz I think the strength of solutions journalism at this time can also just be seen in the sort of exploratory element we're seeing in a lot of stories, especially in regards to education, where there's been so much disruption that folks now are saying, "Like this is the moment that we can take a look at our education system, and see where we can rebuild it in ways that don't embed racism, that don't leave children out." And so if we can interrogate those solutions that people are coming up with, we're at a really great moment in time to do that. And we're seeing now that it wasn't necessarily a legality issue that improvements to education weren't happening, it was political will and circumstances. So I think that it's a great moment right now to look forward.

Mallary Tenore Yeah. And I think it's so important what you all are saying. And one thing that I've noticed in looking at the solutions stories about COVID-19 is that they're all scalable. Right. So that's a really critical component of any solution stories. So in other words, the solution has the potential to be replicated in another community. It's not necessarily isolated to that one community. And that notion of scalability seems especially relevant in the midst of everything that's going on right now, when communities are really searching for answers and trying to learn from one another. So I'm curious, when doing solutions journalism, how do you determine if a solution is scalable?

Brittany Schock I can start with this one. What I tell our journalists when you're writing a story, you're focused on the issue. That your story is about someone responding to an issue. And it's not about a program someone did or any of the false solutions stuff that Tina talked about. Like there's no Chris P Bacon's here. And I think that helps with scalability because these issues are everywhere, whether it be these big hairy issues like criminal justice reform, racism, infant mortality. Whatever it is, they're all over. And so that, I think, is really important. It's to focus on the issue at hand and the responses to those issues, because then you can talk about whether it's a big story or a little story. As long as that's your focus, that means you can replicate it over and over again.

Dahlia Bazzaz I would say in a practical sense, also, if you're comparing or trying to bring lessons back from another system or a model back to sort of the main institution that you cover, you have to know the one that you're trying to grab solutions for really well. You have to know the data around whatever school system, government system, public utilities system really well, so that when you're going and reporting on the solution that happens somewhere else, you know how to ask the right questions. And you're doing that sort of mental calculus. And so that when you show up there, you can sort of do the analysis in your head and pivot in that way.

Mallory Tenore I like that mental calculus idea. Good points. We've been talking a little bit about the importance and prevalence of scalability and solutions in this time of a pandemic. But one of our attendees, who's been studying solutions journalism for a while, has asked, "What about covering the Black Lives Matter movement from a solutions perspective?" Have you guys seen some good solutions stories coming out of the Black Lives Matter movement? Tina, you're shaking your head yes.

Tina Rosenberg Yeah. I mean, we have special collections in the Solutions Story Tracker for COVID, as Brittany pointed out, but also for race and policing. And so we're really focusing on collecting solutions stories on those issues. Solutions journalism is not a breaking news tool. You would not cover a protest through a solutions lens. It's a tool for covering issues and problems. And so the problems that the Black Lives Matter movement focuses on can all be covered through a solutions lens. And there are lots of stories out there about, just to name a few, Camden and how it totally overhauled and reformed its police department a few years ago. Somewhere in Oregon that has defunded the police and moved many of their tasks to social workers and mental health staff in the past. There's pieces from places that have managed to reform police contracts that shielded police from accountability. Northern Ireland managed to reform its police to make it much more equitable, so it was no longer just sort of carrying out the wishes of the majority and enforcing them against a minority. How did they do that? Those lessons are important. So there's lots of things that one can report on.

Mallory Tenore Great. Thank you, Tina. And I like how you said that solutions journalism is not something that you're going to do for a breaking news story. I think that's important to convey. And it is making me think about this question from one of our attendees, who says, "Tina, you talked about solutions journalism, and what it is and isn't." And she's asking, "Can you do a daily news story through a solution journalism approach, or do you think it has to be more of an in-depth story most of the time?"

Tina Rosenberg You can. You can do a daily story. If your beat is a neighborhood, you can look for what that neighborhood is doing that's solving problems. If your beat is an issue, don't just cover crime. Look at what's happening to bring down crime in a certain neighborhood. If they're local stories, and you know the issue well, and you know the beat well, and you don't have to do a lot of extra research, I don't see why that cannot be a regular beat story for you. But I'm sure Brittany and Dahlia have other things to say about that.

Brittany Schock I just dropped a link in the Zoom chat. Tina and I talked a lot actually at the last solutions journalism conference we had about doing solutions journalism in a quicker turnaround, when you have a time crunch. And so for me, one of the things I talked about is a preflight checklist. Like when you're doing just a normal story, you can ask yourself, could there be a solutions angle to this? And so it's not any extra mental gymnastics on your part to think, "OK, I have to come up with this huge solutions journalism project." Look at the work you're already doing and see if there is a solutions angle. And then for me, the biggest advice that I have to give myself all of the time is try not to save the world. And with every single solution story, you're making a cup of tea. You're not boiling the ocean. You have to kind of narrow your focus, and that'll keep you from doing these huge, gigantic projects that seem like they'll never get done. You have to look at some smaller chunks of the pie sometimes.

Dahlia Bazzaz Yeah, I would say that there are some also. There might be some stories that you're covering, and the way that you're covering them has some elements of solutions journalism in it. So for example, like last year, there was a move from some community advocates for a middle school in Seattle to adopt this new STEM model. And so they would sort of like disregard some of the traditional classroom standards and do mostly project-based learning. They would have internships with different tech companies. And it was designed to get more kids into STEM, more kids of color specifically into STEM. And so there was a solution that the public was offering to what we see in the Seattle area. A lot of tech workers are not from the Seattle area. They come in from other places in the country. And so this story, it forced me to go to another school where this program was in place. And so I was able to sort of look at what was their transfer rate, if they had tracked how many kids were going into tech after they had graduated from this particular program. And so that was just sort of something that was demanded of me to do with the beat reporting, but it was a solution story.

Mallory Tenore That's great. Yeah, I love the idea of thinking about it in terms of your own beat, and how can you sort of weave it in to some of the daily stories you're working on? Because we all have those back-burner stories. Those stories that we want to tell, and we keep putting them on the back burner. And they simmer, but we don't actually get them to boil. And they don't come to fruition. But if you can think about sort of weaving in solutions into your day-to-day reporting, then you can begin to sort of think about solutions more readily, as opposed to making them that afterthought or reserving them for the longer-term stories.

Now in hearing you guys talk, I mean, it's very clear that your news organizations really value solutions storytelling, which I think is amazing. I know that there are some journalists who are skeptics. I mean, I think that journalists tend to be a skeptical bunch. Right. And sometimes there's this misconception that solution stories are fluffy, and that they're all tied up with this pretty bow at the end. And so I'm thinking about this in regard to one of our questions from the audience. And he asks, "What seems to be the source of resistance that you encounter when you bring up taking on a solutions journalism approach, especially when you're talking with journalists who aren't used to approaching stories this way?" So I wonder if some of you can speak to that, and what those sources of resistance are and how you try to kind of redirect those?

Tina Rosenberg Yeah, I'll take a stab at that. When we first started the Solutions Journalism Network, we anticipated we'd have a huge amount of pushback from journalists, and we didn't. I think that a lot of journalists know that they don't want to cover only problems, and they know their readers don't want to read that. But they were uncomfortable and afraid to try covering solution stories because they didn't want it to come out sounding like cheerleading, or PR, or advocacy. So if we could show them a system for doing it where it didn't come out like that, then they were fine. I mean, and the opposition was much, much less than we had thought.

The problem, though, is that it did not translate always into changing behavior. You know, people want to do solutions stories, but it's just different enough from what I have to do in my regular day that I will think about it tomorrow. I'm too busy today. Tomorrow never comes. So I really love the idea of boiling that cup of tea. Do it on your beat. Because that way you can make tomorrow, today.

Mallory Tenore Yeah, I really like that. And sort of piggybacking off of that. Brittany, I wonder if you can talk about how do you sort of create a culture within a newsroom that is

accepting of solutions stories and that encourages them among reporters? Because I think that question of culture is important because, yes, you can have sort of one reporter in your newsroom who is working on these stories. But if you're getting encouragement from the top down and you're having an editor who's saying, "We value this type of storytelling. It's important," I think it then encourages the newsroom to follow suit. So I wonder if you can talk about how that's played out a little bit at your news organization?

Brittany Schock Yeah, definitely. And I think at the very, very beginning, I mean I'm thinking three, four years ago when we first started doing this, I think under previous leadership there was a little bit of resistance, just in the nature of not fully understanding what it was. To me, it's the rigorous reporting on responses to a problem or an issue. That rigorous reporting part is really important because, you know, that keeps it, I think, from being fluffy and the kind of stuff that journalists kind of shy away from.

We've been through many iterations of how solutions journalism works in our newsroom. It's gone from one individual at a time working on these big, long projects, like the Infant Mortality Project I mentioned, to teams of reporters working on projects that have lasted a year and a half at a time, which led to a lot of burnout. And now at this point, it's trying to practice those quicker turnaround stories and developing a regular cadence in the newsroom. My position helps a lot in that, and keeping that focus, and remembering that this is something that we need to do on a regular basis. It also helps that we're very transparent to our audience and to our funders specifically about what solutions journalism projects we're doing on the regular. So there's a little bit of pressure, but in a good way, to be able to produce something to say, "Hey, look, we're spending your money wisely, and we're doing this. And we're delivering a product." And I think in this current iteration, it's working a lot better. Because, like I said, there's that accountability that each reporter has, and it just makes it feel like it's more possible to do. And there's a lot less pressure on a reporter to try to think of this big, meaty project and that kind of intimidating factor of like, "Oh, my God. Am I going to have time to do this?" So like I said, we've been through a lot of iterations of it. But at some point we just decided as an organization that this is something that is going to be part of our values, and that we're going to move forward and start doing.

I'm really lucky to work in an organization like that. If you are at an organization that isn't so like top down, like gung ho about solutions journalism as we are, I think it is about doing that. Just asking those solutions questions, asking yourself if there's an angle. And like Tina said with her AIDS story, like having that different angle. They really appreciated that. And I think editors will appreciate solutions journalism even if they don't quite know what it is.

Yeah, no, I think that's really helpful. And I like this idea that Tina had mentioned where our sort of traditional approach is to look at what's wrong. Right. And we sort of have to flip stories inside out, as you did Tina with the AIDS story, and really sort of reframe our thinking around the way that we approach stories. And it's not about ignoring the problem because we can't tell solution stories without acknowledging the problem, but it's really about telling that whole story. That looks at the solutions and helps sort of find a pathway forward.

So there's a question here, and he's interested in trying to incorporate solutions journalism in his newsroom. And one of his questions is, "How do you go about training your journalists to learn how to do solutions stories?" And, Dahlia, maybe you can speak to this a little bit as someone who came into the Seattle Times not really having done solutions

stories before. How did you go about learning how to do it? And was there any sort of training or resources that you found helpful along the way?

Well, it helped that we had SJN come in and train us literally. So, yeah, we had the Solutions Journalism Network come and do trainings, and I sat in on those. And I think The Seattle Times is fortunate in that by the time I got there, there was already a culture of solutions journalism spreading throughout the newsroom. We had created separate projects besides just education that used solutions journalism as a lens. We had done some investigations using the solutions lens. So in that sort of culture, I was able to just walk up to my colleagues and ask them how to do it. But I know that's not helpful for the question that's being asked. I would say there were definitely parts about doing solutions stories that I was unsure of, and things that I had to really learn by doing. And I would say that the best way to start with a solution story is to look at any data available that can help you see if there has been progress, if you're trying to evaluate whether something is a solution or not. So if there's any sort of metric or goal that is widely accepted in whatever industry that you're covering or whatever problem you're covering. Let's say you're covering transportation systems, and you're trying to find something that will reduce the amount of bus accidents or traffic accidents. You could research and request different accident rates for different types of busses, or bus vendors, or something like that. So I think that's a really good way to get started, and that's the way I started doing it as well. I did like a sort of solution piece on teacher diversity, and I was just looking through a data set that showed me the racial demographics of all the teachers in Washington state. And then I kind of compared them over years. And I looked at the districts that had made the most progress in adding teachers of color, and that's where I started my search. So then it was a very open-ended process from there. So I went to those districts, and I said, "OK, show me what you're doing. How did you get to this number?" And I didn't really have much of a process in that besides just saying, like, "Hey, can you please tell me how you got to these numbers? Tell me about your processes. Can I learn a little bit more about how your human resources department is set up?" And of course, I also had to figure out what my base or comparison district was. So I chose my main one, Seattle Public Schools. And I looked at what they were doing in their practices, and why they weren't making as much progress. And I compared to what they were doing and sort of made conclusions based on that. I hope that helps a little bit. But data can be really helpful in this.

Tina Rosenberg You said you did not have a process, but you've just described your process, which is take the problem, cut it into small pieces, each piece being an important part of the problem, and then use data to see who's doing a better job. That is, in like a couple of sentences, how you do a solution story. I want to say specifically for the commenter that we have a very big program in Latin America, and the Fundación Gabo, which is based in Cartagena, Colombia, has lots and lots of resources for journalists about periodismo de soluciones in Spanish. I think there may be some stuff in Portuguese, but I'm not sure. Anyway, there's a lot there. So please check that out.

Mallory Tenore Yeah, that's great. I'm glad you think that, Tina. And yeah, Solutions Journalism Network has been sort of my go to for learning about solutions journalism. And one thing I've learned from following their work is this idea of positive deviance, so taking a positive deviance approach to the way you're looking at stories. So in other words, you're sort of identifying the people or policies that defy the norm, and thus achieve better outcomes as a result. So that then becomes a starting point to determine what is working, and that can lead you on a path toward discovering more solutions.

So I want to get to this question that we have here, and this person asks, "Do policymakers or action takers see eye to eye with solutions journalism, and do they pay attention to solutions journalism?" And I wonder if any of you in the course of your work have noticed that being the case.

Tina Rosenberg Brittany, you have.

Brittany Schock Are you thinking the baby boxes?

Tina Rosenberg And other things, but, yeah.

Brittany Schock Mostly on a local level, I would say. Like Richland Source, we're pretty hyper local, especially when you think about being here at ISOJ, where this is an international symposium. We cover Richland County, Ohio, pretty extensively, and that's about it. Not to say it's a bad thing, but it's much easier to make change and to get people's attention on that hyper local level, I think, because we have closer relationships with the policy makers, our local governments that's going on. It's much easier to sit down in a meeting with them and say, "Have you read this? Have you looked at the stuff that's going on?" I have all their emails and their cell phone numbers. It's easier to make those connections and then get them to pay attention and look at the work we're doing.

So I would say yes from my experience on a hyper local level. When you have those relationships, and you're able to force people to pay attention in the nicest way possible. But to say, "Hey, this is really important, and you should read it." Then it is a little easier to see change happen. And oh my gosh, it's so gratifying too.

Dahlia Bazzaz I agree with that, too. And I think also if you want to maximize how much politicians or authority figures pay attention, you have to be really smart about timing as well. Like, say they're considering reforming a certain aspect of government, or let's say like policing. You know, if you if you write a good solution story about what a police department did to improve or reduce instances of excessive force, and you release it at the right time, that could really come across their radar. Because at that moment, they're probably looking at other plans across the country, talking to their colleagues that work in different cities or different states. And so you can sort of be a part of the list of information that they're digesting.

Tina Rosenberg It is shocking how little officials know about what's going on in cities even a few miles away from them. There is no widespread base of knowledge there. And so it's up to us to provide that.

Mallary Tenore The onus is on us as journalists to do that through a solutions lens. So I think that this has all been a really important and such a good conversation. I feel like I could talk about this for days and days, but we do have to wrap up in just a minute.

And so one of the things that I wanted to just leave all of you with is this idea that solutions journalism is rigorously reported, but it can also offer up this great sense of hope. And SJN had published a piece, I think, just this week. And there was this great line in it, and it said, "Light candles rather than curse the darkness." And I love that line because I think it's especially relevant given the times that we're in, and it's especially relevant as we think about the potential that solutions journalism has to create hope, and create change, and to build trust. So I encourage everybody to go forth and find the light as journalists. And I thank you all for being here today. You had great questions, and you three had such good

insights. So I hope we can continue the conversation offline and online on social media. And thank you so much for your time today.

Rosental Alves All right, so if I put my camera here, I can say thank you very, very much. This was a fascinating, great panel. I think solutions journalism, like I said in the beginning, have been growing as a movement, and I was pleased when Mallary had the idea of doing this. So wonderful.

So I would like to end the third day of ISOJ online by inviting you to come back tomorrow. We're going to have a very strong and longer session tomorrow, starting at 8:30 Central Time United States, with the research breakfast, which is a tradition of ISOJ. The topic is gender, media and politics in the digital age. It's a very strong discussion that we're going to have with great researchers there. Then we're going to have the keynote speaker at 10 Central. Nikole Hannah-Jones, this big star of the New York Times Magazine, she's going to be in a conversation with Jeff Jarvis. I can't wait to get to that. And then we have our brunch workshop with Sally Lehrman from the Trust Project on building trust best practices to improve engagement through transparency, inclusion and ethics. That's going to be excellent too. Everything is excellent. Then we're going to have the research panel with the papers that were peer reviewed that are going to be presented. We're going to announce which one was the top paper, and we're going to announce the publishing of the ISOJ Research Journal. And finally, Product Management: How News Organizations Can Become More Audience Oriented, Data Driven and Product Focused. That's going to be a great day.

But before we end, I want to take a moment to give an incredibly huge thank you to our sponsors. Thanks to the Knight Foundation, Google News Initiative, Microsoft, Univision, JSK fellowships at Stanford, the Trust Project and the Moody College of Communication at the University of Texas at Austin. So thank you very much for a great day and for a great panel on solutions journalism. And we're going to see you tomorrow again. Thank you. Bye bye.