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“IT’S GETTING PEOPLE MORE ENGAGED IN THINGS”: RESPONSES TO SOLUTIONS-ORIENTED NEWS IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

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This preprint presents preliminary findings from a major new study that examines UK audience perceptions of solutions-oriented journalism in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a nationally representative survey (n=2015) and in-depth interviews (n=59), members of the UK public were asked about their evaluations of problems-focussed news and solutions-orientated news. Findings suggest that UK audiences are – on the whole – positive towards the concept of solutions-oriented news, identifying its potential to enhance their interest in the news, feel more positive about the potential for change, and empower them to take actions in their local community. We also reveal some of the demographic factors that are associated with support for solutions journalism.

Keywords: constructive journalism; positive news; negativity bias, covid-19; solutions journalism

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This report is the second pre-print from the UKRI/AHRC-funded Covid-19 Rapid Response research project, *COJO for COVID Recovery: Solutions-focused Constructive Journalism as a Pandemic Exit Strategy for the UK's Local/Regional Communities*.

The project is led by Bournemouth University, in collaboration with Newsquest Media Company, the Solutions Journalism Network, and the Association of British Science Writers.

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For further information, please visit: <https://cojouk.org>.

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INTRODUCTION

Following the recent release of [*The Pandemic News Experience: Covid-19, News Consumption, Mental Health, and the Demand for Positive News*](#) (Nguyen et al, 2021), this second pre-print from the COJO for COVID Recovery project will present a preliminary analysis of audience responses to solution-oriented news. Solutions-oriented, or solutions-focused, journalism is the most prevalent variant of constructive journalism (COJO). Building on positive psychology, it breaks from traditional journalism's focus on social problems to a balance between problems *and* solutions to problems, i.e. reporting on problems rigorously while paying due attention to actual or possible solutions to problems (McIntyre and Gyldensted 2018). It aims to inform, motivate and empower people to deal with the problems they face in daily public and private life.

This report will summarise the key trends from our preliminary analysis of 24 in-depth interviews and a national survey with 2015 UK residents. Four key sets of findings related to audience responses to solutions-oriented journalism emerge from this analysis:

1. While there is recognition of the importance of focusing on societal problems in the news, UK news consumers were also quite critical of its effect on the mood and mental health of the public.
2. UK news consumers feel that solutions-oriented journalism can improve the public mood, make them more optimistic about the future and more empowered to take actions in their local community.
3. Where barriers to solutions-oriented journalism exist, they typically relate to a distrust of the mainstream media.
4. UK news consumers want local news outlets to cover a range of topics when it comes to solutions-oriented news.

For the purpose of anonymisation, all participant names in this report are pseudonyms.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

The preliminary data set out in this report came from two sources. The first included 24 of a total of 59 **in-depth interviews** that we held with members of the public, including community leaders, between 15 February and 3 March 2021. Community leaders were self-defined and included people in positions such as school governors, local community volunteers, local business leaders and so on. The interviews were semi-structured and asked participants to respond to questions in three broad themes:

1. General news consumption in normal times (before the pandemic)
2. Pandemic news consumption and experience
3. Their responses to the potential values of constructive, solutions-oriented journalism both in general and in the context of the pandemic (the focus of this report)

Second, the findings of these interviews then fed into the design of a **national survey** on the pandemic news experience and attitudes towards solutions journalism. It gathered more

information to quantify and scale the phenomena observed in the in-depth interviews, as well as to explore other relevant issues that have been raised in the research literature on news consumption in times of crisis. Questions were specifically asked about, *inter alia*, their uses of Covid-19 news “in the past 12 months”, its impact on mental health, how it has shaped the respondent’s pandemic experience, what constructive journalism can do to help them to exit from the pandemic in an informed, motivated and inspired manner. The survey was completed by a representative sample of 2015 UK residents aged 16+ that was recruited by Opinium (a professional research and polling company). The survey was live from 22 to 24 March 2021, exactly one year after the UK went into the first lockdown, and was administered by Opinium.

Most of the findings in this report refer to ‘responses to solutions-oriented journalism’, but how did we introduce this concept to participants? Methodologically, introducing a new concept in a survey presents a number of challenges, as the more information and examples researchers need to explain the concept, the more they risk losing the attention of respondents, resulting in an uneven engagement with the subsequent questions and therefore introducing biases to the dataset.

In the **survey**, we adopted techniques from concept testing research to walk this tightrope by briefly explaining the concept in a way that is as neutral as possible, with one example, illustrated below:

In recent years, some news outlets have gradually moved to a news practice that aims to report not only on problems in society but also solutions to problems. This news style is known as solution-oriented news. For instance, when reporting on remote learning during the Covid-19 lockdown, a traditional news story would focus on the many social, technical and psychological barriers that children face. A solution-oriented news story does not stop there: it will go on to tell audiences some possible pathways out – for example, how a school has managed to outperform itself during lockdown by starting the school day later than normal, offering one-to-one tutorials, and providing pupils with computer and Internet equipment.

In the interviews, however, we took advantage of the online face-to-face conversation to present participants with [a short video clip](#) in which the Solutions Journalism Network explains the concept. Where respondents asked for further clarification, we also used the above explanation and example, of course in a much less structured standardised format than in the survey.

When presenting demographic influences on survey responses in this report, we performed the t-tests for statistically significant differences on key background variables: gender, attachment to news (casual Vs dedicated news follower), education (grouped into those with and those without degree-level qualifications) and age (groups into those under 35 and those 35 or over). Where such demographic variables are not mentioned, this means there was no statistically significant difference.

PERCEPTIONS OF NEWS FOCUSED ON SOCIETAL PROBLEMS

Before introducing participants to the concept of solutions-oriented news, we asked them how they felt about news that focusses on problems which, as both audience and news content research consistently tells us, is the status quo for most journalistic practice in Western democracies (Soroka and McAdams, 2015). This, we might argue, is for good reason. After all, protecting the public interest through bringing to light abuses of power, corruption and incompetence are core features of journalism’s role as a ‘fourth estate’ and a defining feature of a functioning democracy (Christians and Glasser, 2009; Norris, 2003).



When we presented participants with some statements justifying the reasons for news that focusses on problems, it is clear that the UK public recognise its democratic virtues. More than half of the respondents agreed that news must focus on problems in order to hold power to account (56%), to keep society vigilant (55%) and to create a collective will to overcome societal problems (51%). In contrast, only around 10% disagreed with such statements. However, it is also notable that despite the perceived centrality of fourth estate function of journalism in the UK, over one third of the UK public remain ambivalent to its value. Interestingly, support for problems-focussed news was held more dearly by avid news consumers, with casual news consumers less likely to agree. Men and those with higher levels of education were also significantly more likely to see the value of problems-focused news for holding power to account. Examples for this stance are Eric and Luca, who see news media as indispensable “part of a democracy” (Eric):

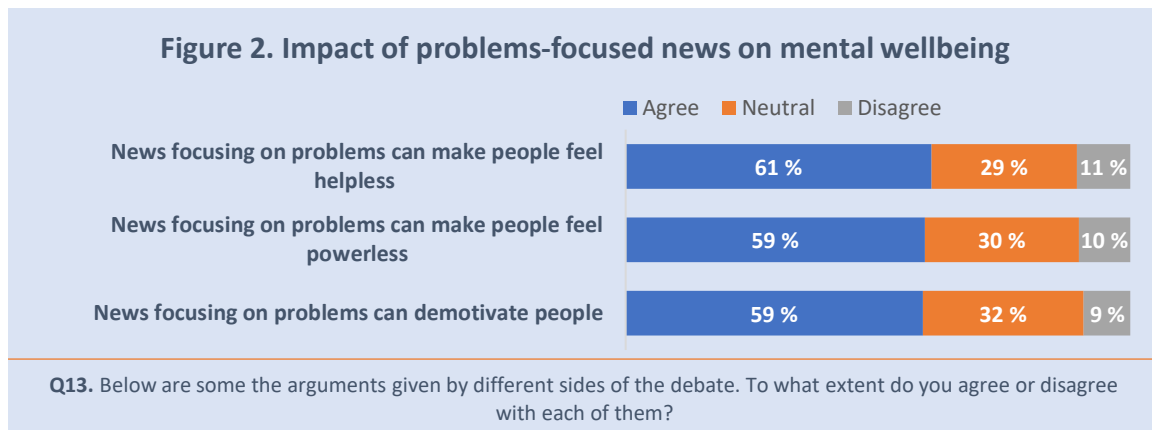
If you feel more informed you feel more in control. And because I feel that it's our duty to be you know, partly at least, it's our duty to keep up to date with the news... It's almost your duty to keep up to date with what's going well and what's not going well. You know, so you can hold the politicians to account and make informed choices. (Eric)

But the point about news is that it's always, always, always about holding people to account. It's about exposing power, right; and you waste your breath if you want to prioritize happy news. ... We live in a totally unequal world; we are a totally unequal

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We are a totally unequal society; and the priority has to be given to actually rooting out and exposing abuses of power - not celebrating, you know, happy news.

- Luca -

society; and the priority has to be given to actually rooting out and exposing abuses of power - not celebrating, you know, happy news. (Luca)



While there is little disagreement to the importance of focusing on societal problems in the news, UK news consumers were also quite critical of its effect on the mood and mental health of the public. Three fifths (61%) of UK adults agree that news focusing on problems can make people feel helpless. Similarly, about the same number of people agreed that news focusing on problems can make people feel powerless (59%) and that it can demotivate people (59%). Looking at demographic details, these three statements are supported especially by women and casual news consumers.

In the interviews, participants regularly expressed mental and emotional unease with negative news coverage (also documented in our first [pre-print report](#)), particularly in relation to the pandemic. Ross, for example, felt it “just frustrates and annoys me”. Other participants such as Rohan felt increasingly depressed and **demotivated** when tuning into news:

It's got it is definitely made me feel more down, it's made me worse because I'm already very pessimistic and depressed. It's made me have a much more bleak outlook on the future. (Rohan)

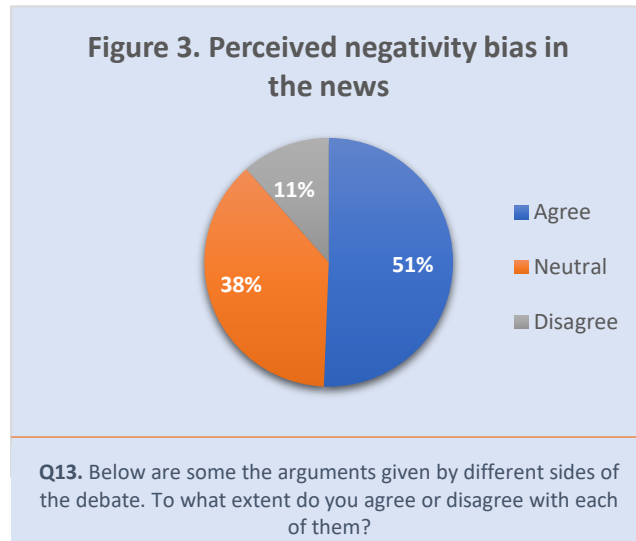
Mikaela and Christine reflect a feeling of uneasiness, which translates into feeling **helpless** and **powerless** about politics on the one side, but also about the behaviour of ordinary people on the other side. People breaking rules becomes a moral argument, and news consumers describe being left increasingly with a feeling of impotence about the lack of law enforcement and shared moral standards during a pandemic.

I suppose you feel kind of helpless, don't you? You kind of feel frustrated because you feel like we should be doing better as a country, and you just kind of think 'oh God why didn't they close the borders earlier on?' to stop all the infections coming in. And so you kind of do feel a bit frustrated by it. (Mikaela)

Most probably the biggest one is frustration and anger with people; and with the way it's been reported ... When you see people breaking lockdown rules or the rules

being too lax or being too loose that creates an anxiety. You think like – hang on: are we ever going to get out of this? (Christine)

Some participants felt everyday problem-centered news coverage during the pandemic impacting strongly on both their mental and even physical health. In response, many interviewees saw only one way of coping – to switch off all news devices, an issue that we discussed in some detail in the first [pre-print report](#) (Nguyen et al, 2021).



Extending this theme of negativity bias was the general agreement that ‘the world is a better place than what people see in the news’ (51% agreement, with only 12% disagreement), with regular news consumers and the more educated more likely to agree (Figure 3). These responses indicate that news media are seen as biased towards pessimism. When explored qualitatively in the context of COVID-19, however, there was some recognition that the pandemic made it difficult for journalists to focus on the positives.

How can you present positive news when everything's negative? It's impossible ... Obviously the more positivity you can spread the better, but the issue that you have then is about finding the fair balance because... How about you released a positive story and then get ‘oh, by the way, 3000 people have died?’ It's like ‘oh well I forgot about that positive story now because you've just told me 3000 people died’. (Jack)

In summary, then, while the UK public appears to understand the need for stories that focus on societal problems, the survey results show a largely critical stance towards the impacts – particularly related to mental wellbeing - of news focusing only on problems. In this sense, results suggested a demand for alternative (less negative) news stories.

RESPONSES TO SOLUTIONS-ORIENTED NEWS

Previous studies to examine audience perceptions of solution-oriented journalism have found it can lead to positive affect and higher motivation to take positive actions (e.g. Baden, McIntyre, and Homberg 2019), increased optimism and empowerment (e.g. Gielan, Furl, and Jackson 2017), and enhanced interest in similar stories (e.g. McIntyre and Sobel 2017).

Our survey results largely echo the positive sentiment of these existing studies (see Figure 4). 61%

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I think it will open up more informed debate ... If somebody is really trying to find a solution, you debate around that solution to make it better.

- Helen -

participants agreed that solution-oriented news can help them to be more informed and also 61% thought that such news can serve as a source of good knowledge for them, with females and those with higher levels of education significantly more likely to agree with the statements. Both statements speak to the potential of citizen **empowerment** through solutions-oriented news; a sentiment echoed in our qualitative data. For one participant, this style of news:

seems much more beneficial to the public consuming the information because rather than being bombarded with negativity, people can be informed on situations and more importantly how they can help and how others can help. (Anonymous)

For Helen, solutions-oriented journalism allows for focussed debate around concrete ideas, an improvement on the status quo:

I think it will open up more informed debate ... If somebody is really trying to find a solution, you debate around that solution to make it better. It's like a starting point, rather than just having this black wall of the problem that everybody chucks off stupid things into ... So, I think it actually involves a wider audience in developing the solution.



More than half of the participants thought that the news could help them to imagine a better world (58%), bring positive changes to society (54%), and create more hope (53%), all themes related to **optimism**. Females and the higher educated were all significantly more likely to agree with these sentiments, with younger people more likely to agree in the case of 'imagine a better world'). In open-ended responses, survey participants felt that solutions-oriented journalism "offer[s] optimism and inspiration to boost people" and "would provide some people with hope that bad situations will get better with time and collective effort." These were also echoed clearly in our in-depth interviews, where respondents said that the practice

... would encourage people to be more proactive and realise that there is more that people can do, and there are ways people can improve things. (It) might change people's psychology to be a bit more positive about the world. (Mikaela)

...might bring a more positive outlook on society. At the moment I know people who avoid the news because it's too negative, and it's just no good to tell me what's wrong with the world and how there's no way to fix it and we're all doomed. I think if you started telling people that...this is what's happening ... and ways that we can help to save this... I think people will be more open to giving it a go. (Chloe)

About half of the participants (49%) felt that solution-oriented news can inspire them to **take actions**, with females, younger people and higher educated significantly more likely to agree. This is an important finding in the context of the historically low levels of political participation, especially amongst the young (Hay 2007; Farthing 2010; Henn and Foard 2012). This was a prominent theme in the qualitative data too, with participants claiming the practice "(gives) people the tools and knowledge to take action if they want to help," and "(motivates) people to move forward - to help others - and to realise that the world is not all bad!" Important here are the related feelings of motivation, positivity, connection to community and empowerment, that accompany the intention to take actions. For example:

It might give you ideas and ways, where you can get involved yourself, because you kind of feel like there's nothing I can do with the environment and global warming, you can think, well, I can recycle and I can and use less power, electricity and gas...they could inspire you to get more involved...feel like actually you can make a difference... (Mikaela)

Anything that encourages people joining together as communities ... and looking out for the neighbours to engaging more with others, helping others can get people to feel better about life ... maybe volunteering and just contributing in some small way. There's an opportunity through solutions journalism to try and get people to do something good. (Davide)

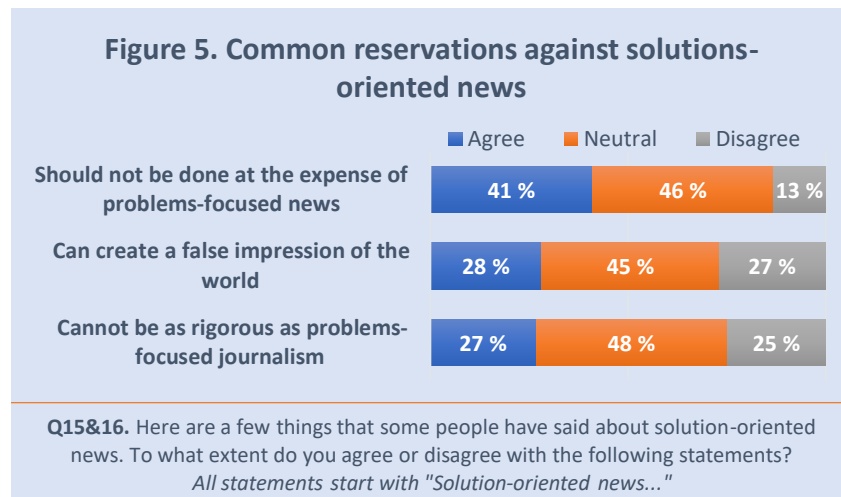
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Helping others can get people to feel better about life ... maybe volunteering and just contributing in some small way. There's an opportunity through solutions journalism to try and get people to do something good.

- Davide -

Given the many challenges that news organisations face in both attracting and monetising audiences in the post-digital landscape, it is notable that 52% participants agreed that this type of news can increase their **interest in news** in Figure 4 (with females, young people and the higher educated again significantly more likely to agree). This opens up the possibility that beyond the audience benefits of solutions journalism, that it can also be a commercial strategy too.

POTENTIAL BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT WITH SOLUTIONS-ORIENTED NEWS

Nevertheless, it was important to understand potential barriers or objections to solutions-oriented news in news audiences. We therefore proposed three sentiments that represent common reservations against solutions-oriented news: that it might crowd out or replace problems-focused or watchdog journalism, that it can create a false impression of the world, and cannot be as rigorous as problems-focused journalism.



On the first sentiment, Figure 5 shows that 41% participants thought that solution-oriented news concept “should not be done at the expense of problems-focused news”, with only 13% disagreeing. Females were significantly more likely to agree with this statement than men, and so were those with

stronger attachment to news and higher levels of education. Such findings should offer some reassurance to newsrooms who practise solutions journalism alongside or as part of their fourth estate role.

Opinions, however, were largely divided on the question of whether solutions-oriented news “can create a false impression of the world” and “cannot be as rigorous as problems-focused journalism”, with almost half of participants on the fence. Interestingly, while females were consistently more sympathetic towards solutions journalism across the survey, they were also significantly more likely than men to *disagree* with these statements, as were casual news consumers and younger people.

While critical responses to solutions-oriented journalism were quite rare in our interviews, there was some evidence of them in the open-ended survey question. For example, some responses directly addressed the unrealistic nature of solutions journalism, as a potential limitation:

Solutions are often unrealistic, utopian and give the public unrealistic expectations of what could happen. They also tend to focus on solutions that appeal to their political leanings and audience profile. (Anonymous)

It can be positive and inspiring to see. However, solutions can often be very situational and not always applicable to problems in other settings. (Anonymous)

Others – highly suspicious of the (politicised) mainstream media – were more openly hostile:

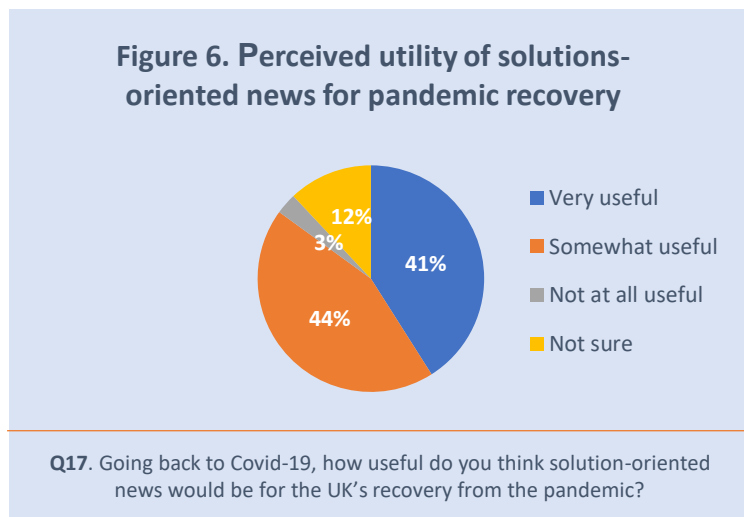
A false way of describing what is actually happening. In reality, the mainstream news crafts a narrative, usually a leftist and globalist one and presents the news in a fashion that supports the political narrative. The 'solutions' pushed are of course all from one political direction and all others are downplayed, censored and derided. The word for that is PROPOGANDA (*sic*). Don't try to dream up pretentious new terms for it. Journalists are now essentially political agitators, not unbiased reporters of events and situations. (Anonymous)

Some participants were concerned that this practice "will no doubt be manipulated by the media to only focus on things that suit their own biased agendas especially the BBC" and had reserved opinions because "some agencies have their own agenda and 'spin' the news" (Anonymous).

Media trust is a complicated issue which is interrelated with multiple factors, including individual (e.g. personality), media (e.g. news content characteristics and news brand identities) and contextual (e.g. interpersonal discussion) factors (Ognyanova 2019; Toff et al., 2021). The above comments from participants remind us that solutions-oriented journalism does not transcend the deep-rooted distrust that some news consumers have developed towards the mainstream media.

RESPONSES TO SOLUTIONS-ORIENTED NEWS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE PANDEMIC

After asking respondents about their general responses to solutions-oriented news, we then asked them how useful they thought it would be in helping the UK's recovery from the pandemic. As seen in Figure 6, nearly nine in ten participants evaluated this type of journalism as "very useful" (41%) or "somewhat useful" (44%), and only 3% "not at all useful", suggesting a very positive response to the concept.



Consistent with the survey findings, our interviewees also acknowledged the potential positive impact of solutions-oriented news in the context of the pandemic. Again, themes of positive **mood**, **optimism**, and **confidence** emerged in these interviews. For example,

It would help because, if it's right that we actually are coming out of the pandemic and we are moving back both from lockdown but also economically, we will start to move back up to normalcy. If there was reporting that reflected that, then generally

maybe the mood of the nation as well would come out of being in stupor, and lift itself up. (Isaac)

Rather sitting there saying it's all good to know how many people have died this week and the vaccinations have slowed up, and why aren't we getting our vaccinations, we turn around and say, actually look they built a new health care centre and they're going to be able to do this. Now I wonder when it's going to be open, and how we can get access to it. You become more positive. (Helen)

It'll help people a lot psychologically, because I think that there's still people that have a lot of anxiety regarding the virus and the vaccinations. If solutions journalism is providing the all-round story, it will give people the confidence to make certain decisions regarding particular things so it will help them psychologically. To recover from some of the damage that has been done from the constant negative news as well. (Nigel)

Interviewees also acknowledged the role of solution-oriented journalism in motivating **actions**, for example, in local community building during the pandemic recovery. As seen in the following comments:

“If solutions journalism is providing the all-round story, it will give people the confidence to make certain decisions regarding particular things so it will help them psychologically.”

- Nigel -

“It's getting people more engaged in things...on a local level, which can often be influencing...let's say you're highlighting a story on...local economy in a particular town. A lot of people get engaged in that it might bring people into...spending money in those areas, encouraging local businesses to improve...it would be beneficial especially getting more people engaged.” (Alexander)

It becomes better reporting on what individuals are doing, the positives...publicising ways for individuals to get involved in that, and a sort of call to action...you know, 'this person is working 10 hours a week as a community volunteer, but you don't have to do that. You could just volunteer for 30 minutes a week to talk to somebody'. It's finding different ways for people to participate. (Helen)

IMPORTANT SOLUTION TOPICS FOR LOCAL NEWS OUTLETS

Finally – and looking forward to the upcoming rollout of a solutions-oriented news campaign across local news outlets in the UK – we asked respondents what subject areas relating to the UK's transition out of the COVID-19 crisis are most important to be covered. This was initially an open question in the interviews, the findings of which fed into this list of subjects offered to survey participants.

When it came to expectations of how local news journalism should develop in the next year, the overall results showed that there was a wide agreement among survey respondents of

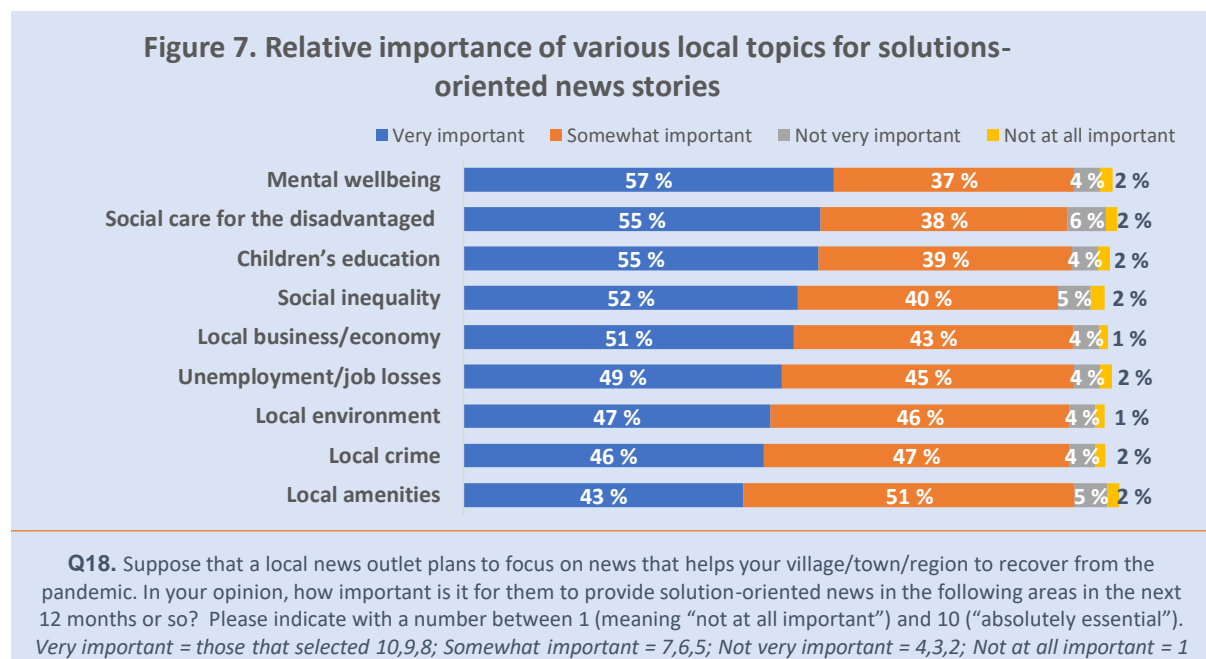
all nine topics being “somewhat” or “very important” (93-95%). This highlights wishes for local journalism to cover a broad range of topics post-pandemic, ranging from health to society to economics.

Looking at topics in detail, there are some differences within how important each topic is seen individually. On the top of the list we can find mental wellbeing. It is the topic most often considered as “very important” by survey respondents (57 %) and was also a consistently strong theme in our interview data. For example, Chloe believes that “because we're [Telford] one of the worst effected places in the Midlands”, locally, mental health will be a “big issue”. Anna suggests that:

They could have a section in the news to do with mental health and what people can do, what sites they can go to, what help is available – things like that ... People need the news to show them where they can go to get the support they need.

The importance of local news media in covering mental health effects and provisions was of central concern to our participants, but, as Christopher says, mental wellbeing is also about receiving reassurance about basic health factors in local news media, such as pandemic treatment places and pandemic prevention measures. For him, local news should focus on the practicalities of the vaccine: “how they can get it and explain specific things - how they may feel after that” so that people are more informed and less reliant on rumour and guesswork. This might reduce fear and anxiety in news consumers. Anthony adds here that listening to stories with a communal twist of hope are equally having a positive effect on mental well-being:

For me it's seeing positive stories. How families have helped each other and how communities have lifted each other. (Anthony)



The next three topics considered 'very important' are social care for the disadvantaged and children's education (both 55%). Isaac (a school governor), saw particular utility for solutions-oriented news about the reopening of schools:

That's a big topic as to the school - the children's wellbeing ... So, if they've got some kids who are at home, some who are in class, or here's an example of a school that's brought all its kids back and look how well they're doing it, maybe that would actually really help conversations along when you're back in a school environment.

Social inequality is also considered as topic with a high relevance (52 %). For Nigel, solutions-oriented journalism could cover:

Ways in which the communities can get more support. For people who are in genuine need. I feel like in my community, in particular, people have been forgotten. We still have a lot of families around here that are basically on the breadline, and are having to use things like food bank and stuff to try and get by on a day-to-day basis. (Nigel)

There are five further topics, which are seen as slightly less important. Local business/economy is "very important" for 51% of respondents, followed by unemployment/job losses (49 %), local environment (47 %), crime (46 %), and local amenities (43 %). In the interviews, some participants articulated a role for local media that – through the coverage of problems *and* solutions – supports the transition to a post-pandemic society as facilitators, central information source, and provision of guidance. In light of potential anti-social behaviours post-lockdown, Mandy wanted the news to be "responsible". "Perhaps set up some Zoom type of videos that people can watch. Questions and answers or help along someone in councils, or parks wherever people are gathering."

Local news, then, can serve as place for a reconstitution of mental wellbeing and societal ties. They are also able to provide a general (local) information point and hence, can act as one actor in the transition to a post-pandemic society. This links together different models of journalism, where factual and watchdog reporting combines with service journalism.

SUMMARISING DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES IN RESPONSES TO SOLUTIONS-ORIENTED NEWS

Our statistical analysis of the survey revealed that some demographics were consistently related to different opinions on the solutions-oriented news. First, across the board, **female** participants were significantly more sympathetic towards solution-oriented news than males. This finding coincides with the experimental study by Baden, McIntyre and Homberg (2019), but differs from those by Hermans and Gyldensted (2019) which found no significant difference between genders. Second, in terms of age, our survey found that for around half of the variables, **younger** participants tended to be more open to the benefits of solution-oriented journalism. This finding is contrary to Hermans and Gyldensted's (2019) study which found that baby boomers attached significantly higher importance to the solution-oriented elements in the news stories than younger generations. However, it resonates with

the work of Herman and Prins (2020) who conducted an experiment with millennials (roughly, people born between 1981 and 1996). They found that by using solutions-oriented perspectives journalists could better serve and engage with this younger age group. Third, for a smaller number of variables, our survey found that **dedicated news followers** were significantly more likely to recognise of the benefits of solution-oriented news, as were those with degree or higher levels of **education**.

Such analysis might lead us towards a certain demographic (younger, female, educated, interested in news) that may constitute a more fertile 'market' for solutions-oriented news. However, with the exception of gender there were many sentiments that had no demographic differences, so we would hesitate to reduce the potential audience for solutions-oriented news to these variables only. As our findings showed, there is broad support for solutions-oriented journalism across all demographics.

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