

# The Psychological Empowerment Potential of Solutions Journalism: Perspectives from Pandemic News Users in the UK

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Corresponding author: [xzhao@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:xzhao@bournemouth.ac.uk)

## Abstract

Traditional problem-focussed news often cast audiences in passive and reactive ways, which can disempower them from participating in civic life. With influences from positive psychology, solutions journalism (SOJO) is proposed as a way to improve audiences' mental wellbeing and engagement with the news. However, research seldom systematically examines how SOJO psychologically empowers audiences, leaving a gap for a more thorough understanding of the potential of SOJO in fulfilling the democratic role of journalism. Drawing on the theory of psychological empowerment (PE) and through 59 in-depth interviews with members of the public in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, we examine UK audience responses to the concept of SOJO. Normatively promising findings emerged from our study. SOJO was considered to be useful in intrapersonal empowerment (i.e. increasing perceived control and self-efficacy), interactional empowerment (i.e. enhancing critical awareness), and behavioural empowerment (i.e. motivating community involvement and coping behaviours). Theoretically, this study establishes a firm connection between SOJO and PE which, we argue, has important implications for journalism's often troubled relationship with civic engagement. As such, we call for a rethinking of the often taken-for-granted problem-focussed news practices.

*Keywords:* solutions journalism, constructive journalism, negative news, psychological empowerment, civic engagement, news consumption

## Introduction

News that focuses on societal problems (e.g. death, injury, conflict, failures of public administration) is, as studies of newsroom cultures (e.g. Damstra and De Swert 2020; Donsbach 2004) and news content (e.g. Harcup and O'Neill 2017; Lengauer, Esser, and Berganza 2012) consistently tell us, the dominant form of journalistic practice in Western democracies. This, we might argue, is for good reason. After all, protecting the public interest through bringing to light abuses of power, corruption, and incompetence and through warning people of hazards and threats are core features of journalism's role as the "fourth estate" and a defining feature of a functioning democracy (Christians et al. 2009; Norris 2000). However, many have argued that in the attempt to fulfil their fourth estate role, journalists have allowed a negativity bias to consume their prevailing occupational culture (Niven 2001; Patterson 1996; Soroka and McAdams 2015). Here, cynicism engulfs scepticism, problems are privileged over solutions, and failures are emphasised with undue attention to successes.

The problem-focussed news narrative can disempower audiences from both intrapersonal (e.g. declining mental health) and interactional (e.g. lack of critical awareness, desensitisation) perspectives, which have detrimental effect on civic engagement behaviours (e.g. Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Hibberd and Nguyen 2013; Szabo and Hopkinson 2007). If anything, such findings have intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic (Stainback, Hearne, and Trieu 2020), where despite a surge in news consumption, 56% of Britons avoided the news during its peak citing a “bad effect on my mood” as the reason (Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, and Nielsen 2020). Such findings bear troubling implications: without an informed and engaged citizenry that feels empowered to participate in public life, journalism fails a key part of its “democratic promise” (Lewis 2006).

Following Lewis (2006), this study considers how the nature of news might be re-examined in order to enhance the quality of civic engagement. This involves moving beyond the question of how well news “serves the needs of democracy” (Bennett 2016, 25), to consider what it would look like if it did. Specifically, we examine the psychological empowerment potential of solution-focussed constructive journalism, which has been offered as an antidote to problem-focused news, and re-articulation of taken-for-granted news values. Constructive journalism is defined as “an emerging form of journalism that involves applying positive psychology techniques to news processes and production in an effort to create productive and engaging coverage, while holding true to journalism’s core functions” (McIntyre and Gyldensted 2017, 23). Of several branches of constructive journalism, solutions journalism (SOJO) has recently emerged as the most popular one, being increasingly practised in newsrooms around the world (McIntyre and Gyldensted 2017). SOJO is defined as a rigorous, evidence-based, and balanced news reporting that focuses on responses to social problems and aims to motivate and empower readers to contribute to societal change (McIntyre and Lough 2021). Proponents of SOJO value the role of this type of journalistic practice on various layers beyond the information function, including improving audience emotions (e.g. hope and optimism), inspiring societies with possible solutions to problems, and stimulating positive societal changes (Aitamurto and Varma 2018; Gyldensted 2015; Haagerup 2017; Meier 2018).

To date, studies on SOJO have explored their psychological benefits for audiences through the lens of positive psychology (Hermans and Gyldensted 2019; McIntyre and Gyldensted 2017, 2018), cognitive appraisal theory, and the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (McIntyre 2020). Nevertheless, no study has empirically underpinned the specific effects of SOJO on different layers of audience empowerment (emotional, cognitive, and behavioural) in a holistic way. This is important in light of the aforementioned deleterious effect that news consumption (particularly in politics and current affairs) can have on audience disempowerment and civic engagement (Elenbaas and de Vreese 2008; Jackson, 2011). Given the necessity of considering intrapersonal (e.g. emotion and cognition), interactional (e.g. cognition), and behavioural components in assessing civic engagement (e.g. Bizer et al. 2004; Bobek et al. 2009; Moon 2013), this study fills the gap by drawing on the theory of psychological empowerment (PE) which refers to “the connection between a sense of personal competence, a desire for, and a willingness to take action in the public domain” (Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988, 725). Specifically, this study focuses on the *empowering process* of SOJO from the three perspectives of intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioural empowerment, which will shed light on the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural empowering mechanisms of SOJO as a media intervention (Zimmerman 1995).

## News, audiences and (dis)empowerment

The news has a somewhat paradoxical relationship with audience empowerment and civic engagement. A consistent finding of the 'media mobilisation' literature is that the more a citizen consumes news media, the more likely they are to be politically knowledgeable and engaged (e.g. Boulianne 2020; Strömbäck and Shehata 2010; Tworzecki and Semetko 2012). This in turn motivates citizens to seek out more information via the news, akin to a "virtuous circle" (Norris 2000). On the other hand, certain news frames – routinised in journalistic culture – are consistently found to increase political cynicism and, in certain circumstances, erode the intention to participate in civic life (Strömbäck and Shehata 2010; Tworzecki and Semetko 2012). For example, the constant framing of the game of politics, instead of its substance, can increase political cynicism and erode political participation (Cappella and Jamieson 1997). Besides the cognitive perspective, the disempowering effect of problem-focussed news on civic engagement also happens on the emotional level. Growing evidence demonstrates the negative psychological impact of problem-focussed news on audiences' mental health, such as anxiety, mood disturbance, and decreased positive affect (e.g. Szabo and Hopkinson 2007). These underpin feelings of perceived lack of agency and a pervasive sense of hopelessness, which are typical manifestations of disempowerment (Baden 2019; Hibberd and Nguyen 2013).

Other work has been critical of the disempowering way that citizens are represented in media discourse. Lewis (2006, 312), for example, found that UK and U.S. television news systematically positioned citizens as audiences or observers of news but not participants:

...television news tends to represent citizens as passive and apolitical. People were shown reacting rather than proposing, offering descriptions rather than opinions, recounting experiences rather than ideas. In sum, politics was something done to people rather than something that people did.

This, as Lewis (2006) argues, is in part a consequence of the 'top-down' structure of news reporting, which systematically favours the activities of those in power. This is compounded by the narrative structure of news which fails to engage or involve audiences in a story's development (Lewis 2003).

SOJO is an intervention that challenges the dominant narrative structure of news reporting, aiming to empower audiences (Hermans and Gyldensted 2019; McIntyre 2020; McIntyre and Lough 2021). First, instead of solely focussing on problems as what traditional journalism would do, SOJO is more balanced in terms of covering both the problems (e.g. conflict, destruction, and incompetence) and the solutions to these problems (e.g. collaboration, reconstruction, and advancement). To solidify the efficacy of such solutions, SOJO puts emphasis on the rigour of the solutions which should be evidence-based, come from deep sourcing, and embrace diversity and inclusivity of voices. Second, rather than neglecting audiences when structuring the news narrative, SOJO aims to "provide information that audiences can use" to make audiences "feel like that they can be part of the solution to a common problem" (McIntyre and Lough 2021, 1567). In other words, SOJO aims to empower the audience in a multi-layered way, including intrapersonal empowerment in terms of emotions (e.g. eliciting positive feelings) and cognition (e.g. enhancing self-efficacy), interactional empowerment in terms of cognition (e.g. informing the audiences about solutions to problems), and behavioural empowerment in terms of motivating actions.

## SOJO and audience empowerment

Gauged by the purpose of SOJO in empowering audiences, previous audience studies have examined the effect of this constructive journalism practice on several dominant themes of audience empowerment, including positive affect, engagement with the news, critical awareness, self-efficacy, and motivating actions.

Extant studies have consistently found an increase in *positive affect* (e.g. inspired, determined, attentive, and active) among the audiences who are exposed to different types of solutions news stories (Baden, McIntyre, and Homberg 2019; McIntyre 2015, 2020). There is also evidence that SOJO can encourage greater *engagement with the news*. For example, *The Guardian* found from an 18-month trial that solutions news stories are read more deeply and shared more widely than other types of stories (Rice-Oxley 2018; also, see Meier 2018). Hermans and Prins (2020) found that participants who read solutions-focused constructive news are also significantly more likely to “like” the story online than those who read a non-constructive one, though they found no other significant effects on online engagement. Findings, however, are less conclusive regarding *critical awareness* as an outcome of reading solutions news. For example, some studies found that audiences reading solution-oriented news stories are more likely to feel better informed about the issue (Curry and Hammonds 2014) whereas others did not (Lough and McIntyre 2021; Meier 2018).

Beyond positively impacting on peoples’ mood, engagement with news, and critical awareness lie more profound outcomes of SOJO for citizens and for democratic engagement: self-efficacy and motivating actions. In both cases, there is scope for further research. In terms of the influence of SOJO in enhancing audience *self-efficacy*, studies have generated mixed findings. McIntyre (2015) found that the solution information in a news story did not impact audiences’ confidence in tackling the social issue by themselves, or self-efficacy. In contrast, Curry, Stroud, and McGregor (2016) and Curry and Hammonds (2014) found that respondents reading solutions-based news stories were significantly more likely to report an increase in self-efficacy (e.g. believing that they could contribute to a solution to the issue). Similarly, an experimental study found that participants reading solution-focused news stories reported significantly higher levels of self-efficacy than those in the problem-focused group, and the higher the rating of the solution’s effectiveness, the higher the rating of self-efficacy (Gielan, Furl, and Jackson 2017). Moreover, participants reading community stories with a problem-solving angle reported greater self-efficacy, and some even indicated an increased collective efficacy (Wenzel et al. 2018).

The impact of SOJO in *motivating actions* is also yet to be fully established. Here, one strand of literature does not find a positive effect of SOJO in increasing audience intentions (e.g. sharing the story or supporting the cause) or actual behaviours to take actions (McIntyre 2015). Similarly, McIntyre (2019) also found that the presence of solution information in news stories did not impact readers’ behavioural intentions (e.g. volunteering to help find a solution to a problem) or actual behaviours (e.g. donating money). Another strand reports more promising effects of solutions news on motivating actions. For example, Baden, McIntyre, and Homberg (2019) found that exposure to constructive journalism embedded with a solution-frame resulted in higher motivation to take positive actions (e.g. being environmentally friendly and taking action to better the world). Similarly, Curry and Hammonds (2014) also reported that SOJO readers were more likely to report their intentions to engage in finding a solution to an issue.

Questions, therefore, remain over the democratic potential of SOJO, especially as it relates to citizen empowerment. Theoretically, this means adopting a comprehensive framework that goes beyond self-efficacy to include other dimensions of empowerment that have consequences for citizen engagement in public life. For such a task, we draw upon the theory of psychological empowerment (PE) (Zimmerman 1995).

### **Psychological empowerment**

PE refers to “the connection between a sense of personal competence, a desire for, and a willingness to take action in the public domain” (Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988, 725). The empowering processes and empowered outcomes are usually distinguished in studies on PE (Hur 2006; Zimmerman 1995), where empowerment is both a means to an outcome as well as an outcome itself. Specifically, empowering processes refer to “those where people create or are given opportunities to control their own destiny and influence the decisions that affect their lives” and empowerment outcomes refer to the consequences of the empowering processes (Zimmerman 1995, 583). This study focusses on the empowering processes of SOJO on news audiences although, as we find, these are often closely linked to empowerment outcomes.

PE differs from notions such as individual empowerment because the former involves not only self-perceived control and competence over and knowledge of the socio-political environment, i.e. the emotion and the cognition, but also community engagement, i.e. the behaviour (Zimmerman 1990, 1995; Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988). PE is deeply rooted in community psychology and closely related to strategies of stress management, adaptation to change, and bringing changes to the community (Zimmerman 2000). Ideally, the empowering process would be “involving community members in the development, implementation, and evaluation of interventions” (Zimmerman 1995, 584).

PE is an overarching concept that includes self-perceptions of control and competence to exert influence in a certain context (intrapersonal component), knowledge of the socio-political environment in that context (interactional component), and engagement behaviours to exert influence in that context (behavioural component) (Zimmerman 1990, 1995). A full picture of PE would not be realised if any of the three components falls short (Zimmerman 1995). Each of the above three components is composed of several categories.

The *intrapersonal component* includes the elements of perceived control (emotion), self-efficacy (cognition), and perceived competence (cognition) (Hur 2006; Li 2019; Zimmerman 1995; Zimmerman et al. 1992). Specifically, perceived control refers to one’s belief about their ability to exert influence in different specific contexts (e.g. community); self-efficacy refers to one’s evaluation of their capability to accomplish a certain task; and perceived competence refers to one’s evaluation of their capability to successfully complete a certain task. Given the wide range of operationalisation of perceived control and the concentration on the intrapersonal element of empowerment, this study particularly focuses on the perceived control of internal emotional states which refers to one’s “perceptions of their ability to control their internal states and moderate the impact of aversive events on their emotions, thoughts, and physical well-being” (Pallant 2000, 312).

The *interactional component* involves several categories in cognition, including critical awareness, understanding causal agents, skill development and transfer across life domains, and resource mobilisation (Hur 2006; Li 2019; Zimmerman 1995; Zimmerman et al. 1992). Specifically, critical awareness refers to one's knowledge about the socio-political environment (e.g. being disadvantaged by a policy). Understanding causal agents refers to one's critical evaluation of the factors (e.g. actors such as politicians and events such as public hearing) that may hinder or boost one's influence in finishing a task in a certain socio-political environment. Skills development and transfer across life domains point to the decision-making, problem-solving, and leadership skills which can enable the independent civic participation of the individuals. Resource mobilisation refers to one's capability to manoeuvre resources to achieve desired goals in a certain socio-political context.

The *behavioural component* involves participation in community or organisational activities and engagement in coping behaviours, such as behaviours to manage stress or adapt to change (Zimmerman 1995).

Theoretically, PE is closely connected to civic engagement which is generally composed of three major categories involving the ability to "(1) acquire and process information relevant to formulating opinions about civic matters, (2) voice and debate opinions and beliefs related to civic life within communities or publics, and (3) take action in concert and/or tension with social institutions such as political parties, government, corporations, or community groups" (Gordon, Baldwin-Philippi, and Balestra 2013, 2). Empirically, research suggests a significant relation between PE and civic engagement, whereby psychologically empowered individuals are more likely to engage in civic activities (Leung 2009; Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988).

Inherently, PE underlies some of the most important normative roles of journalism in society: to keep audiences informed and to mobilise them towards acts of civic participation (Norris 2000). However, despite some application in the broader field of media and communication (e.g. Leung 2009; Stavrositu and Sundar 2012), so far the theory of PE seems to be neglected by journalism studies scholarship. Amidst the scholarly endeavours to understand the psychological impact of SOJO on audiences (e.g. Hermans and Gyldensted 2019; McIntyre and Gyldensted 2017, 2018), this study examines the potential of SOJO in achieving PE among news audiences. This study asks:

How do news users evaluate the psychological empowerment potential of SOJO from the intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioural perspectives?

## **Method**

Existing studies on the public responses to SOJO typically adopted quantitative research methods, for example, experiments (Baden, McIntyre, and Homberg 2019; Hermans and Prins 2020; McIntyre 2015; Meier 2018), quasi-experiments (Curry and Hammonds 2014; McIntyre 2020), field tests (Curry, Stroud, and McGregor 2016), surveys (Hermans and Gyldensted 2019; Lough and McIntyre 2021), and sentiment analysis (Lough and McIntyre 2021). While quantitative approaches offer many advantages of scale and the precise measurement of variables, they can lack nuance, context, and depth that only comes through qualitative inquiry. Although a few relevant studies employed qualitative methods, there are still space to understand the psychological consequences of consuming SOJO. For example, although Meier (2018) used face-to-face interviews, they did not present a systematic analysis of the interview data, while Wenzel et al.'s (2018) study using focus groups did not address any psychological frameworks.

In this study, we conducted 59 semi-structured in-depth interviews with members of the UK public between 15 February and 3 March 2021. Anyone who more or less consumed the news during the pandemic was eligible for the research. While we make no claims to representativeness, participants were recruited through a specialist fieldwork agency to comprehensively reflect the UK population in terms of gender, ethnicity, geographical location, age, and occupation. The interviews were conducted via Zoom by five researchers from the project team. Zoom allows the interviewers to bypass the restrictions caused by the ongoing pandemic, including the lockdown at the time of data collection, while maintaining the key principles of semi-structured in-depth interviews (Gray et al. 2020; Morris 2015). These include flexible and free-flowing interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee, space to obtain more clarity and details from the interviewee on the questions asked, and a balance between a structured interview guide and scope for digression.

Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. The interviews asked participants to respond to questions in three broad themes: participants' general news consumption in normal times (before the pandemic); pandemic news consumption and experience; and responses to the potential values of SOJO both in general and in the context of the pandemic. The interview schedule was set up in a way to allow interviewees to move from a critical self-reflection on their general and pandemic news experience to their initial responses to the general SOJO concept before moving to discuss the potential of SOJO in the specific context of the pandemic. Questions that covered aspects of PE were introduced in general ways and in the language participants would understand. For example, we explored the participants' responses to the empowerment potential of SOJO in the context of the pandemic with questions such as: "Think about the next 12 months and beyond, when we are likely to gradually get back to a new normal. In what ways, if any, do you think solutions-focussed news might help people to recover from the pandemic?" These questions allowed participants to lead and make their own definitions of empowerment. This paper only reports interviewees' responses to the third theme, though we could draw on the context of previous responses in the analysis of the data.

Methodologically, introducing the new concept, SOJO, in the interview 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. We adopted techniques from concept testing research and took advantage of the online face-to-face conversation to present participants with a short, two-minute explainer video by the leading not-for-profit organisation that promotes SOJO as a new way to “tell the whole story,” the Solutions Journalism Network (SJM; 2016). The animation, aided by sombre music in the background, first introduces the traditional problems-focussed bias of the news and its potential impacts on public mood and outlook as well as society at large. It then explains the basic formula of SOJO – especially the balance between problems and solutions to problems – as a countermeasure to that negative bias, using illustrative news headlines such as “Local entrepreneurs key to job growth.” Where respondents asked for further clarification, we used the following explanation and example, trying to stay as neutral as possible:

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 equipment and Internet.

The interviews were recorded via Zoom, with transcripts automatically generated by Zoom being further manually checked and edited by two doctoral candidates in journalism and communication studies. Five project members were involved in the collaborative qualitative data analysis software NVivo. We used manual interpretive coding which included a process of open coding, identification of major thematic categories, management of sub-categories, and development of dominant themes (Anderson 2012). Following these procedures, a closer reading of themes took place in a process of meaning condensation (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). Themes were discussed between the members as “critical friends,” providing a point of reflection of interpretations. We used pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of our participants.

## **Findings**

Overall, our participants have envisaged the potential of SOJO in fulfilling all three levels of PE (Zimmerman 1995). Specifically, SOJO was considered to be useful in intrapersonal empowerment (i.e. increasing perceived control and self-efficacy), interactional empowerment (i.e. enhancing critical awareness), and behavioural empowerment (i.e. motivating community involvement and coping behaviours).

### ***Intrapersonal empowerment: Increasing perceived control and self-efficacy***



Our interviews revealed that the public considered SOJO to be useful in increasing intrapersonal empowerment in two themes, increasing perceived control (emotion) and self-efficacy (cognition).

Echoing existing research on the influence of SOJO news stories on increasing audiences' positive affect (Baden, McIntyre, and Homberg 2019; McIntyre 2015, 2020), the public thought it can increase their *perceived control* (i.e. boosting morale, increasing happiness or positivity, and reducing anxiety). They strongly acknowledged the potential of SOJO to enhance their internal states of emotion and tackle the negative impact of the pandemic on their mental well-being (Pallant 2000). What is interesting is that participants usually gauged the promising impact of SOJO on their perceived control against the baseline of negative/problem-focussed news stories, which they were almost overwhelmingly critical of. Three sub-themes emerged in relation to this.

First, participants reported that SOJO would make them feel a boost in morale and become confident and cheerful both in general and in the context of the pandemic. In the general context, for example, Nikki mentioned that by "showing that there are problems, but we are not leaving them ... [SOJO] raises morale and makes us feel like we're doing something good together."

Some participants mentioned how the solutions provided in the SOJO stories could help them to lift their spirit in the face of the damages caused by the pandemic. For example, Anne said that they would like to see more entrepreneurial cases in the economic recovery included in the news, which they believed would make people feel confident about post-pandemic life. Consistently, Josh also mentioned that news providing "solutions in terms of how businesses are coping or how people can help or help themselves" could cheer them up. Oscar saw the potential of SOJO in boosting morale in not only the pandemic but also a broader context:

[SOJO] would help us obviously face problems with more ease. Right now, people are more reluctant or more anxious towards certain problems. But if that kind of journalism was more widespread and more people were informed about it, it would generally have a really good impact on the way that we perceive things like the job market, Covid 19. Even [for big issues like] global warming, there needs to be a positive affirmation [about ways of] handling it. They make people more hopeful about what's to come, especially when it's just been consistently negative news like right now. The future needs to have some positive outlook rather than negative. (Oscar)

Second, participants frequently mentioned the potential of SOJO in increasing happiness and positivity especially during the pandemic. For example, Anne responded that knowing "something positive being done ... and people can do to ... to make things better ... gives you a bit of positive energy ... in light of all these negative things happening at the minute." Similarly, Nina said that "[For issues like] education and jobs, [SOJO] makes people feel more positive that we are going in the right direction." Chloe and Rebecca had more detailed explanations.

[SOJO] 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 here are ways that we can help to save this ... I think people will be more open to giving it a go. (Chloe)

It could be really important for society to have the solutions ... [showing that] not everything is rubbish, [but with] just a bit more positivity and trying to elicit a bit of hope and happiness and a future. Because at the minute I don't imagine many people see there is a future. I [have] the feeling that what we are all feeling during the pandemic is grief and the loss of the world that we used to know. It would be nice if they could have that type of journalism. [It] could help us get over that [the grief] and feel positive and feel like there is a future and hope. (Rebecca)

Interestingly, Rebecca also differentiated SOJO from positive news, saying that SOJO is not "solely about publishing news about positive things but [is about] taking the things that could be considered negative, actually just laying it out there, not putting a spin on it but still trying to [examine how it might] work."

Third, participants also reported that a reduction of anxiety could be one of the promising outcomes of SOJO. For instance,

When I was watching that video, I thought [SOJO] helps people's mental health. You would always hit a negative event, [for example,] you have lost your job. If there is something positive somewhere else, you might think maybe I can participate [in] something good [that is] happening in the world. But if you just see doom and gloom all the time from the news, [especially when] you have problems, it [the news] brings down mental health. So I think [news] focusing on solutions is positive. You can see things that you could import in your own life. You think well things are not so bad. It has a huge influence on mental health. (Lily)

[SOJO] will help people a lot psychologically, because I think that there are 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)

Our interviews also documented participants' responses to a boost in *self-efficacy* in dealing with daily life issues. For Ellie, seeing problem-focussed news showing that "there is nothing you can do about it" made them "feel powerless." Instead, they would like to see news telling them what we can do to stop issues like crimes. Mikaela and Natasha envisaged an increase in self-efficacy in dealing with environmental protection issues when exposed to SOJO. For instance, Mikaela said that "[SOJO makes you] think I can recycle and use less power, electricity and gas ... They could inspire you to do and get more involved." Similarly, Natasha thought that "[SOJO makes you feel that] I am going to do something simple about global warming or emissions ... maybe by taking the bus. So that might be quite good for people that do not necessarily know how to help." Consistent perception also appeared in people's evaluation of the potential of SOJO in enhancing people's belief in their capacity to deal with the damages caused by the pandemic. For example, Nina called for news stories about individuals who made contributions to collective efforts to mitigate the pandemic's impacts, such as Sir Tom Moore – a 100-year-old former British Army Captain who raised millions of pounds for charity during the pandemic. This is not simply about celebrating these individuals' heroic efforts but also, for Nina, about inspiring and helping news audiences to realise that they, too, can make their own contribution in similar ways:

When you have got the personal touch, like Tom Moore and individuals going above and beyond, I think that does inspire people and brings the whole country together. The amount of money that he raised and what he did are very positive. It is for young people to see that somebody of his age standing there going, [they] can also do something to put their life into perspective. [SOJO] gives them some inspiration to try something, to do something to help the community and to help themselves. (Nina)

Our findings show that audiences positively evaluated the SOJO concept in increasing people's self-efficacy. These findings resonate with those from studies on audiences' responses to concrete SOJO stories by, for example, Wenzel et al. (2018), Gielan, Furl, and Jackson (2017), and Curry, Stroud, and McGregor (2016), but contradict the findings of McIntyre (2015).

Apart from reporting the promising effect of SOJO on perceived control and self-efficacy, respondents did not indicate the potential of SOJO in achieving other elements of intrapersonal empowerment, such as perceived competence.

### ***Interactional empowerment: Enhancing critical awareness***

The public also acknowledged the potential of SOJO in enhancing interactional empowerment, specifically, their critical awareness.

First, some participants thought that SOJO could keep them informed about debates on different concrete ideas, or solutions, behind a problem, including the ones caused by the pandemic. In Oscar's words, "people become way more informed about the topic or the issue" if the journalist covers the solutions to the problems instead of "leaving the reader wondering how people are going to solve the problems." Regarding the importance of SOJO in keeping people informed in the pandemic, Basil explained that

This type of journalism would quite honestly clear the fog away; people can see what is not this fluffy cloudy version that a lot of the news companies use just to expand on airtime of words. Pure fact will help to have clarity for the consumer, and that will aid the [pandemic] recovery. The knowledge [disseminated by SOJO] will help us overcome [the pandemic] ... a time when scientists and people are desperate trying to find a solution to the pandemic ... The overexcited tabloid type of reporting ... just spreads panic and fear, rather than hope for the future. (Basil)

A second related theme to emerge was the possibility of SOJO facilitating more informed debates in the public sphere that *people feel empowered to contribute to*. For instance, Isaac said that SOJO would help people have “much better conversations” with friends and family to approach a solution regarding the pandemic included in the news story from different angles. Jack said that instead of following news and information about the pandemic, such as the vaccine, “blindly,” SOJO could help readers to compare the data and try to fill the gaps in information.

Echoing Isaac and Jack, Helen argued that SOJO could improve the quality of public policy debates during the pandemic when “biases and prejudices” are prevalent, which will benefit civic engagement:

I think it will open up more informed debate at the moment ... 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. (Helen)

Such perceived potentials of SOJO in increasing readers' critical knowledge echo those by Curry and Hammonds (2014) which demonstrated readers' increase in their understanding of the issue after reading SOJO stories but contradict those by Lough and McIntyre (2021) and Meier (2018) who detected no effect of exposure to SOJO stories on knowledge and understanding.

Nevertheless, participants did not envisage the influence of SOJO on achieving other dimensions of interactional empowerment, such as understanding causal agents, skill development and transfer across life domains, and resource mobilisation.

### ***Behavioural empowerment: Stimulating community involvement and building coping resilience***

We found that SOJO was also related to behavioural empowerment in participants, especially their likelihood of community involvement and coping behaviours.

Participants thought that SOJO could encourage their civic engagement in general, because people are “more likely to be engaged and take part in society if they get good feelings from what they are seeing on the news” (Mark). Similarly, Jodie said that “[SOJO] might make people want to get involved in politics or in charity work ... rather than sitting there thinking I cannot do anything about the problem.”

Participants especially mentioned their intentions to participate in community activities motivated by SOJO because, in Irene's words, SOJO made them feel that getting involved in community activities is not out of their reach. Specifically explaining the motivating effect of SOJO from an empowerment perspective, Seamus said that "[SOJO] might encourage people to get involved and contribute because it empowers people on a community level and do their bit rather than just sitting back and waiting for other people to do things." For Ellie, regarding specific local incidents, such as a gun crime or knife crime, "if you could see that something was working through reporting ... you know we can counteract it ... then surely that makes it that you are part of the solution yourself." Taking a step further, Lily, a volunteer in a community centre, said that SOJO could motivate the centre to come up with innovative solutions to community problems, and thus to better cope with them over time.

The above promising sentiment was also reflected in participants' evaluation of the importance of SOJO in motivating community involvement and coping behaviours in the pandemic recovery. For example, Sophie said that "[SOJO] might encourage me to become involved ... and to inspire people to get together to build communities together and build back up to ... where they were pre pandemic." More specifically, Jodie said that seeing the "constructive approach" to reporting the solutions to the problems such as the unemployment and the loneliness of people during the pandemic would motivate people to make their own contributions. Georgina and Ivan further explained the reasons underlying their motivations to participate in community building and coping activities in the pandemic recovery. Their explanations are closely related to the above elements of PE, such as self-efficacy and critical awareness.

As one part of the pandemic you felt so helpless like I can't fix any of this ... and how do I fit in the larger scale of [the problem if I want to help] ... But if you can show examples of how we could potentially do things or how the community leaders can solve problems, it will inspire more people to get involved. (Georgina)

[SOJO] would be about what individuals who may be part of a bigger group can do to support things that are already going on. Knowing what is going on around the country to support coming out of the pandemic, and knowing how you as an individual, as a member of a group can help. It could be something national that has been diluted down into things that are more local ... You know not only what is going on but also how you could support it. (Ivan)

These findings on the potential of SOJO in facilitating community involvement and motivating coping behaviours respond to the findings on the promising impact of reading concrete SOJO stories in facilitating engagement (Baden, McIntyre, and Homberg 2019; Curry and Hammonds 2014). They are, however, contradictory to those by, for example, McIntyre (2019) and McIntyre (2015) who found no motivational effect of SOJO in eliciting behavioural intentions in an experimental setting.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

One of the aims of SOJO is to transform the negative influence of problem-focussed news narratives on audiences' intrapersonal and interactional states and the consequent disempowering effects. Amidst the academic endeavours to uncover the psychological foundation of SOJO in positively impacting the audience (e.g. Hermans and Gyldensted

2019; McIntyre and Gyldensted 2017, 2018), this study examined the potential of SOJO in psychologically empowering news audiences. Through semi-structured in-depth interviews with members of the UK public in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, we examined their responses to the SOJO concept, using the theory of PE (Zimmerman 1995).

Our study has located evidence of the perceived potential of SOJO in fulfilling all three levels of PE (Zimmerman 1995). First, SOJO was considered to be useful in *intrapersonal empowerment*. The public thought it can increase their perceived control (i.e. boosting morale, increasing happiness or positivity, and reducing anxiety), and self-efficacy. Second, the public also acknowledged the potential of SOJO in enhancing *interactional empowerment*, specifically, their critical awareness (i.e. focusing debate on concrete ideas and generating informed debate). Third, the public responded that SOJO was also related to *behavioural empowerment*, especially their community involvement and coping behaviours. However, our study did not find evidence of participants envisaging other PE aspects in relation to SOJO, such as perceived competence (cognitive element in intrapersonal empowerment), understanding of causal agents, skills development and transfer, and resource mobilisation (cognitive elements in interactional empowerment). But this does not imply evidence of absence, especially as our participants were only presented with a relatively brief introduction to the SOJO concept and were neither exposed to concrete SOJO stories nor asked questions regarding every aspect of the notion of PE. More studies are needed to examine whether and how exposure to SOJO stories can elicit the above elements of PE. Such research would help us to understand the link between SOJO and PE among audiences more thoroughly.

Overall, our findings add to a growing body of research (Baden, McIntyre, and Homberg 2019; McIntyre 2015, 2020) that shows a consistently strong potential of SOJO in eliciting positive affect and emotional responses in audiences. The Covid-19 pandemic allowed us to more specifically re-evaluate and re-think the potential of SOJO in empowering audiences in a unique, unprecedented context. No one can escape the physical, mental, and the collateral societal damages of the pandemic, with news audiences having reported feelings of anxiety, distress, and helplessness as a result of the constant flow of negative and problem-focussed news stories (Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, and Nielsen 2020; Nguyen et al. 2021; Stainback, Hearne, and Trieu 2020). As such, our evidence is more nuanced than previous research in some cognitive and behavioural aspects, including critical awareness (Curry and Hammonds 2014; Lough and McIntyre 2021), self-efficacy (McIntyre 2015; Wenzel et al. 2018), and motivating actions (Baden, McIntyre, and Homberg 2019; McIntyre 2015). After a brief introduction to the SOJO concept, the pandemic-wounded public would find it an empowering channel that can help them to exit from the pandemic and, not less importantly, they were able to articulate and elaborate its values reflexively and critically.

On a more general level, given the close links between PE and civic engagement (Gordon, Baldwin-Philippi, and Balestra 2013; Leung 2009; Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988), our study indicates the potential of SOJO in fulfilling at least part of the “democratic promise” of journalism (Lewis 2006). By placing citizens and citizenship more at the centre of news coverage, it is not only useful in preparing the audience to be emotionally, cognitively, and behaviourally engaged with civic matters: it is also helpful in “establishing the *relevance* of politics and of *connecting* the ‘micro-politics’ of personal experience with the ‘macro-politics’ of the public sphere” (Buckingham 2000, 221, emphasis in original) – for example, by connecting the audience’s personal behavioural intentions with the community common goals. These findings echo previous observations about the contribution of SOJO to a functioning democracy through stimulating public debate, facilitating the construction of the public sphere (McIntyre and Gyldensted 2017), and encouraging more active citizenship (Aitamurto and Varma 2018).

The implication of this research for the news industry is clear: an inadequate exploration, experimentation, and development of SOJO as an element of newsroom culture could be a missed opportunity for the future of both journalism’s public service and its business model. Despite its strong potential for PE and civic engagement, and despite having gained a strong momentum in recent years, SOJO has not yet been “mainstreamed.” Meanwhile, not all those who have practiced SOJO have fully lived up to the promises of this type of journalism practice in advancing the progressivism of journalism, with many having yet to shift from “a largely passive monitorial role to a more active, constructive one” (Aitamurto and Varma 2018, 708). This inadequate realisation of SOJO in newsrooms is due to a range of obstacles, such as the tension between the long-standing journalistic norm of objectivity and the evolution to a more active role of journalism (McIntyre and Lough 2021), the fear of slipping into advocacy journalism (Aitamurto and Varma 2018), the difficulty in transforming the routinised thought processes of journalists when approaching and structuring a news story, and the lack of managerial and institutional resources to support the practice (Lough and McIntyre 2018). However, these obstacles should not be the reasons for a lack of re-thinking and re-examination of the problem-focussed news that have been dominating journalistic practices. Even if the economics of news production are driving problem-focussed news through news values, once closely interrogated, we may find that the negative overtones “serve neither a commercial nor a public interest purpose” but are practiced without question by the news practitioners (Lewis 2006, 311).

This prompts us to challenge the taken-for-granted culture of problem-focussed news practice. We are not arguing that SOJO will be the magic bullet that will reconnect citizens with the news, and with public institutions and community life. It is more to point out that there are other ways to approach stories about societal problems, other news values to imagine, and other sourcing and framing practices that journalists can adopt to make the news more psychologically empowering. As the evidence from this and previous research shows, audiences often respond positively when they are presented with more empowering news styles such as SOJO. Of course, we cannot force people to be informed or active citizens. But we can think about how to facilitate the conditions in which active citizenship may thrive. Challenging established journalistic practices and imagining new constructive ways to report societal problems may be one step towards this goal.

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