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Fighting Against the Machine: Inside a Solutions Journalism Campaign in UK Local Newsrooms

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ABSTRACT

There is growing momentum behind the solutions journalism (SOJO) movement, with news organizations across the world increasingly embedding news reporting practices on how people respond to social problems. Previous research suggests that SOJO has potential to reconfigure relationships between news audiences and journalists, while simultaneously opening new revenue streams. But what impediments might SOJO face in fast-paced and resource-poor newsroom contexts, especially those that serve local audiences? Following a year-long campaign where we helped introduce SOJO into 47 UK local news titles, we begin to answer this question, based on interviews with eight SOJO mentors, 17 journalists and 10 editors, alongside observations from mentors' fora. While journalists saw many benefits to the practice, we outline several impediments to the successful implementation of SOJO in local media, including time and workflow, metrics and institutional rewards, and editorial commitment. Further, we identify the emergence of a pragmatic form of that we call "SOJO lite"; characterized as news that contains elements of solutions journalism but falls short of the widely used definitions suggested by industry leaders. Both findings have implications for the future direction of this emergent journalism practice.

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The inherent negativity and conflict-centredness of news reporting has turned from "a mere 'news value' to an overarching 'news ideology'" (Lengauer, Esser, and Berganza 2012, 181). Such systemic negativity bias in news media (Soroka and McAdams 2015) does not remain without impact on news audiences. Over recent decades, news audiences have become "increasingly apathetic and frustrated" (McIntyre 2019, 17), with scholars warning that the flood of negative news can lead to passivity, anxiety and learned helplessness (Urner 2019). Further, COVID-19 coverage showed that people seek alternative news sources when the negativity of mainstream media is perceived as too high—or avoid consuming news altogether (Newman et al. 2022; Nguyen et al. 2023; Toff and Kalogopoulos, 2020). Indeed, in the United Kingdom alone, selective news avoidance (the

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intentional avoidance of certain news items) doubled between 2017 and 2022 (Newman et al. 2022).

One of the potential antidotes to this supposed malaise is solutions journalism (SOJO, see Lough and McIntyre 2021). A robust corpus of research shows the positive impact of constructive and solutions journalism on audience emotions (Baden, McIntyre, and Homberg 2019; McIntyre 2020; McIntyre and Lough 2023), engagement with and interest in the news (Meier 2018; Rice-Oxley 2018), public knowledge (Curry and Hammonds 2014), self-efficacy (Curry and Hammonds 2014; Gielan, Furl, and Jackson 2017) and psychological empowerment (Zhao, Jackson, and Nguyen 2022). Other studies suggest that SOJO can help rebuild trust in news (Thier et al. 2021). Together, although not entirely conclusive, such evidence suggests that SOJO might have the potential to re-connect and re-engage journalists with their audiences. As such, proponents of SOJO have been making an assertive business case for the practice based on economic sustainability and revenue growth (Solutions Journalism Network 2021).

But, given the increasing economic pressures on the industry, what obstacles might the production of SOJO face in fast-paced and resource-poor newsroom contexts, especially those that serve local audiences? Moreover, could SOJO potentially reconfigure relationships between audiences and journalists without putting further strains on newsroom resources? In this paper, we shed light on these important questions through documenting the outcomes of a SOJO campaign conducted with local news outlets in the UK. Although our focus rests on local newsrooms, we outline several impediments to the successful implementation of SOJO which we argue are unlikely to be unique to the setting of our study. Further, we identify the emergence of a pragmatic form of SOJO that we identify as “SOJO lite”; characterized as news that contains elements of SOJO but falls short of the widely used definitions used by industry leaders such as the Solutions Journalism Network (SJN). In doing so, we outline the implications for the future direction of this journalistic practice.

The Fundamentals of Solutions Journalism

Solutions journalism entered the public lexicon in 1998 (Benesch 1998) but only since the 2010s did a body of theoretical and empirical research emerge (McIntyre and Lough 2021). It is typically considered a branch of constructive journalism, a broader practice that is committed to constructive dialogue and perspectives, while holding true to journalism’s core functions (McIntyre and Gyldensted 2017). Conceptually, it has connections to established practices such as investigative journalism (though its method of evidence gathering) (Wenzel et al. 2018), peace journalism (through its challenge to conflict-oriented reporting) (Thier, 2016) and civic journalism (with a mission to promote citizen engagement and include grassroots voices) (Loizzo, Watson, and Watson 2018). Theoretically, it can be considered as a news frame (McIntyre and Lough 2021) and/ or a news value (Gans 2010).

SOJO is being increasingly practiced in newsrooms around the world (Bro 2019; Krüger et al. 2022; McIntyre and Gyldensted 2017). According to the SJN—the global thought leader in solutions journalism—a solutions story must contain (a) a *response* to a social problem (and how that response has worked or why it hasn’t), (b) *evidence* that shows effectiveness (or lack thereof) of solutions, (c) *insight*, that distills the lessons that make

the response relevant and accessible to others, and (d) any *limitations* to the solution. By presenting solutions to societal problems, SOJO follows a different understanding of news reporting compared to traditional practices, which typically emphasize a problem-centric perspective (Soroka and McAdams 2015). This means that instead of reporting “what’s wrong in the hope that someone can fix it”, SOJO focuses on how problems are being tackled by societal actors in the hope that others can imitate the solutions presented (Benesch 1998, 39), hence, “spotlighting adaptive responses that people and communities can learn from” (Solutions Journalism Network 2021). In this sense, SOJO aims to create a more holistic understanding of societal problems as well as positive change by offering narratives of hope, which seek to inspire a sense of agency, empathy, and engagement, as well as to counter news fatigue (Solutions Journalism Network 2023a).

The potentials of SOJO (and the umbrella category of constructive journalism) are seen by Meier (2018) on three levels, ranging from counteracting negative worldviews at the individual consumer level to an increased audience loyalty and positive brand image on the organizational level, to contributing to possible solutions for social problems and, hence, social engagement and progress on the macrosocial level. SOJO is perceived as one of the “most relevant innovations” in European journalism in the last decade (Meier et al. 2022). It is widely practiced in Western Europe, Scandinavia, and the US, where it is also increasingly embedded in journalism education (Bright 2022; Höhle and Bengtsson 2023). As we write, the Solutions Journalism Network—the global leader in SOJO advocacy and training—claims to have worked and trained 47,000 journalists worldwide (Solutions Journalism Network 2023a).

Academic interest in SOJO has surged in recent years. This is relatively evenly spread between audience studies (e.g., Curry and Hammonds 2014; Thier et al. 2021; Zhao, Jackson, and Nguyen 2022), content studies (Atanasova 2019; Guenther, Brüggemann, and Elkobros 2022; Li 2023; Walth, Dahmen, and Thier 2019) and newsroom production studies (Amiel and Powers 2019; Powers and Curry 2019). It is the latter, with the question of how SOJO is adopted in newsrooms and what challenges it faces, that forms the focus of our study.

The Adaptation of Solutions Journalism in Newsrooms

From the literature, we understand SOJO as having transformative potential as a newsroom strategy (Meier 2018), from at least four angles: SOJO as an innovation; as a business model adaptation; as a motivation for journalists; and as a drive to implement social change (Krüger 2016).

Innovation in journalism is often linked to being either technology-driven (e.g., Westlund, Krumsvik, and Lewis 2021) or actor-centred (such as interlopers or peripheral actors; e.g., Eldridge II 2019; Sherwin and Duffy 2019). In contrast, our focus lies on the adaptation of mainstream journalistic practices and professional culture through focusing on innovation in skills, ideas and practices. Central for maintaining and adapting business models of news publishers in a highly competitive market, journalism displays a “pro-innovation bias” (Steensen and Westlund 2021, 22), aiming to distinguish itself from other news competitors. In terms of SOJO innovation is often framed and facilitated by meta-organizations such as SJN and the Constructive Journalism Institute, which aim to provide structure and support to SOJO projects (Lowrey, Macklin, and Usery 2023).

Existing studies highlight the various contextual factors to the successful implementation of SOJO in newsrooms. In a study of 12 U.S. newsrooms, for example, Nelson and Dahmen (2022) found the strong dependency of newspapers on journalism funders and their ideas around news audiences were a determining factor in incentivizing U.S. newsrooms to adopt SOJO as journalistic practice. French regional newsrooms on the other hand, deployed SOJO as a novel marketing discourse for management (in terms of commercial aims such as attracting readers), placing it behind a paywall. French regional journalists also perceived this as a chance for professional renewal of established journalistic practices, emphasizing in-depth high-quality paid content (Amiel and Powers 2019).

Other examples across the globe highlight the ambiguous character of SOJO and constructive journalism when implemented. This ranges from perceived scepticism of audiences in Croatia which has impacted SOJO practices (Kovacevic and Perisin 2018), to post-genocide Rwanda, where a solutions approach has aided unity, reconciliation, and reconstruction (McIntyre and Sobel 2018). The latter example shows that journalists open to embarking on SOJO principles in their work might be driven by a commitment to contribute to social change akin to the interventionist “change agent” model (see Krüger 2016; van Antwerpen, Turnbull, and Searston 2022). However, this interventionist role orientation can conflict with the SJN model of SOJO, where journalists should maintain standard objectivity practices rather than performing advocacy and mobilizing roles through championing causes. This tension between advocacy vs objectivity norms would appear to be unresolved in both the literature and in practice, and is illustrative of wider discrepancies between the SJN and practicing journalists (Lough and McIntyre 2023; McIntyre and Lough 2021; Powers and Curry 2019; Thier and Namkoong 2023; Usery 2022).

As SOJO is a relatively young sub-field of journalism studies, we are still learning about how it is being implemented in newsrooms and what models of practice are emerging. In terms of newsroom studies, to date, much of our knowledge is based on (a) relatively resource-rich newsrooms, (b) typically on a national/ regional rather than local setting and, (c) contexts where SOJO is already embedded in the newsrooms, that may bring a positivity bias to findings. In this study, we bring attention to the relatively understudied context of local news (in the UK), following an action research project where the researchers worked with industry partners to (a) design and implement a campaign to introduce SOJO to journalists across 47 local newsrooms and (b) use it as an enquiry site to study the facilitators and impediments to SOJO at local journalism level. Our inquiry is informed by the following questions:

RQ1: What value do UK local journalists and editors place on solutions journalism over other models of reporting?

RQ2: What are the institutional and cultural drivers and barriers behind the implementation of solutions journalism practices in UK local newsrooms?

RQ3: How do UK local news practitioners appropriate solutions journalism practice in their daily routines?

Local News in the United Kingdom

The local news sector in the UK is shaped by both strong commercial imperatives and principles of free speech. As with many countries, the transition to digital and related

sharp decline in revenues created considerable turbulence for the sector (Harte, Howells, and Williams 2018) including a declining hard copy circulation (Clark 2017), fragmented audiences with changing demands as well as increased business competition with financial and resource cutbacks or closures of newsrooms (Newman 2023). Currently, more than 80% of the UK's local news media market is controlled by only five companies, with the three largest—Newsquest, Reach and National World—controlling nearly 70% of all local newspaper circulation (Media Reform Coalition 2022). Between 2005 and 2020, around a fifth of local titles (265) closed in the UK (Tobitt 2022). Half of the UK's Local Authority Districts are now news monopolies (Media Reform Coalition 2021), and local “media deserts” (Ferrier, Sinha, and Outrich 2016) or “news deserts” are on the rise (Barclay et al. 2022).

This evidence connects to a wider “local journalism crisis” that has concerned many scholars (Hendrickson 2019, 2; Newman et al. 2021; Nielsen et al. 2020). Franklin defined the value of local journalism as offering “independent and critical commentary on local issues, making local elites accountable, [and] provide a forum for the expression of local views on issues of community concern” (Franklin 2006, p. xix). But increasingly local news struggles with the roles of “everyday watchdogging” (Gans 2010), with the majority of court and council reporters in the UK having gradually disappeared since the 1990s, replaced by PR and press releases (Clark 2017; Davies 2008). These findings raise concerns about the traditional role of news media within a local community, with voices warning of a growing “local democratic deficit” (Clark 2017, 65).

It is in this context that our research is situated. While the commercial pressures facing UK local news might pose challenges for SOJO to thrive, they also present incentives for organizations to implement innovative practices such as SOJO for competitive advantage and economic viability. There are also normative connections between local news and SOJO. Given its commitment to empowering citizens to contribute to their community (Meier et al. 2022), SOJO would appear to offer potential ways for local news outlets to perform some of their fundamental democratic roles.

Method

Our data is based on interviews and observations connected to a wider project that warrants detailing first. Over the course of 18 months in 2021–2022, with funding from UKRI's Covid-19 rapid response scheme, we introduced SOJO into the UK local news industry through a *Solutions Journalism for Pandemic Recovery* campaign.¹ We were partnered with four publishers of regional and local news in the UK: Newsquest (over 250 local news brands), JPI Media (over 170 local news brands, rebranded as National World in April 2022), DC Thomson (6 local news brands) and Illiffe Media (35 local news brands), as well as some stand-alone local and community outlets. Partners were chosen to represent a range of large, medium, and small local news publishers with different associated business models. Participating journalists were recruited by editors of these news titles based on their potential interest in and their capacity to perform SOJO.

The core of the campaign was to train the selected journalists in SOJO, first in bespoke workshops run by the SJN and then through a six-month personalized mentorship by ten senior journalists with rich experience in producing SOJO for national news outlets.² The campaign included two cohorts: the first was for journalists from Newsquest (May-

November 2021) and the second for reporters from the other companies (December-May 2022).

Our plan was to have one or two SOJO-trained journalists per title, who could then act as future mentors for other journalists in their own newsroom. As part of their daily work and over a six-month period, participating journalists were tasked with producing two solutions-based stories per month on local community initiatives to recover from the pandemic. With a target of 50 participating journalists, the aim was for 600 solutions-based news articles by the end of the campaign.³ In total, 51 journalists across 47 local and community news titles participated in the training. Of these, however, only 30 completed at least one SOJO article and 170 stories were published in total. These numbers speak to the level of attrition that we encountered, with several participating journalists, often in junior roles, leaving their jobs during the project, and others being unable to complete even one SOJO article, for reasons that we document in the findings section.

Published stories were coded by the researchers for topical focus, with about one-quarter of stories exploring health and social care-related solutions in the context of Covid-19, conditioned by the timing of our study, and the remaining three quarters covering solutions to more general topics such as how schools were adapting through Covid-19 and how people deal with challenges across different areas of local life. While most stories were backgrounded by the pandemic, not all were *about* the pandemic. Participating journalists covered a range of topics in their daily routines and applied the solutions lens where they felt most appropriate.

In presenting this context we acknowledge that we were personally invested in the success of this project. We designed the project, recruited the partners, secured the funding, oversaw the local SOJO campaign and conducted the primary research to evaluate its success. Our project followed action research design where tasks converge, with the researcher being immersed in the action process while also researching it (Hinchey 2008). Typically employing a collection of methods that pursue action and research at the same time, action research is well suited for examining the introduction of innovations into the newsroom (Wagemans and Witschge 2019). Such strategies respond to calls for an “ethnographic sensibility” in journalism studies that blurs lines between study sites and analytic work to achieve a deeper and more holistic understanding of the phenomena under study (Robinson and Metzler 2016). But blurring such lines can also bring new ethical dilemmas. For example, while we were at arm’s length from the implementation of SOJO in the newsrooms, we co-designed the model of practice and mentorship (with project partners) and maintained a regular interface with mentors and senior management at participating news outlets. For such reasons, we have strived to keep a critical distance when collecting, analysing, and interpreting the data. And while there were incentives for us as project managers to see the campaign succeed, we, as researchers, were equally interested in the factors that lie beneath the failure of SOJO in local newsrooms as we were in the enabling factors.

Interviews

We conducted in-depth interviews with 37 journalists that included 19 mentees, 10 editors and 8 mentors. For mentees, interviews took place as they finished their six-month programme of training, mentorship, and practice (October 2021 for the first

cohort and July 2022 for the second). Editors and mentors were interviewed in July 2022, which represented the end of the overall SOJO campaign. All participants were therefore able to reflect on their experiences of SOJO after at least 6 months of practice. Every journalist that completed the training and participated in the mentoring (51) was invited for interview, as was every editor of participating news titles (47) and all ten mentors. Our sample was therefore self-selecting but represented a good range of journalists and editors that both successfully and unsuccessfully integrated SOJO into the newsroom. Eighteen participants were female and nineteen were male (see supplementary file).

All interviews were conducted by the authors over Zoom and lasted 40–90 min. Interviews were semi-structured, allowing for a range of topics to be discussed, including those raised by interviewees. Nevertheless, all interviews explored participants' experiences of practicing or overseeing SOJO in local news, their perceptions of SOJO as a practice (including its benefits, drawbacks, and their normative evaluations) and the (dis)enabling factors that participants faced in implementing and overseeing SOJO in the newsroom. Throughout the interviews, we placed emphasis on experiences, practices, and routines, to move discussion from the abstract to the concrete.

Observations

We supplement our analysis of the interviews with observations from mentors' fora and their monthly reports throughout the project's duration. This included several formal meetings between the researchers and mentors over the course of the 18-month project, alongside an ongoing WhatsApp group ran by the researchers and mentors (approx. 12,000 words of data). These data were analysed with the permission of the mentors and mentees. Mentors had a unique vantage point from which to observe the project, as they were in regular conversation with the mentees and therefore collected important insights into newsroom experiences of SOJO.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and then coded alongside the transcript of the mentors' WhatsApp group through thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1998) via NVivo. Transcriptions were initially coded into themes that emerged in response to the study's overarching concerns (articulated through the RQs) and from our field notes and observations collected throughout the campaign, then iteratively developed into consolidated themes as we worked through the dataset. Typical of rich qualitative data, other themes emerged organically that were beyond the boundaries of our initial inquiry. The authors kept field-notes from the observational period and interviews, and these acted as points of reflection when analysing the data. In the following section, we work through the findings, organized by the three broad themes of the RQs, identifying sub-themes where they emerged.

Given the potentially commercially sensitive nature of some of the data, participants were anonymized and will be described below by their generic job titles. This was also a condition of Bournemouth University ethics committee, who assessed and approved the research (Ethics ID: 35791). All quotations are from the interviews unless otherwise stated.

Findings

“Back to Basics”: Normative Benefits of Solutions Journalism

The local SOJO campaign started under two favourable conditions. On the industry side, there was enthusiastic support from the executives of the participating news companies. For their part, the SOJO campaign formed part of a strategic focus to move away from maximizing audience reach that can instantly be monetized through advertising, to building loyal audience engagement through quality content that can be turned into subscription revenues. On the audience side, our nation-wide pre-campaign research showed an overwhelming demand for more constructive news that could uplift the spirit of a pandemic-fatigued public (Jackson et al. 2021; Zhaovet al. 2022).

In relation to RQ1, without exception, participating journalists and editors spoke enthusiastically about SOJO. First, and in line with other studies, they spoke of its value for putting local news at the “centre of the community” and strengthening relationships with audiences (Lough and McIntyre 2021). While editors identified some commercial benefits of this, reporters spoke of recent positive encounters with audiences on social media and comments fields, where they are accustomed to receiving abuse (Wright, Jackson and Graham 2020). As one reporter said, “we do get accused as journalists ... of just always focusing on the negative ... Actually, I’ve been trolled a little bit less since I’ve been doing it (SOJO)”. A second aspect of their relationship with audiences speaks to one of the normative claims of SOJO: to empower people to participate in their community (Meier et al. 2022) through playing the journalistic roles of facilitator and mobilizer (Hermans and Gyldensted 2019; Thier and Namkoong 2023). As one mentee said:

One of the biggest things that it could probably do is encourage other people to get involved in their own communities. Encourage people to look at things and think, ‘actually things aren’t a lost cause. I can make a difference and put the spotlight on how other people have done that and almost act as a bit of an inspiration to other people.’

SOJO therefore enabled journalists to see themselves as “source for good” that “holds up a mirror up to society so that society comes up with solutions”, said one editor. For another editor, SOJO took them “back to basics”:

It’s good that we can say to young reporters, ‘Look, this is what journalism is supposed to be about. You’ve got a role to play. You’re not just a machine regurgitating words.’

Even those who struggled to fully embrace SOJO claimed that their SOJO experience would have a lasting impact on their practice. This is reflected in a mindset change where they now actively seek out those who work on solutions to local problems as news sources. One junior reporter gave the example of recent statistics showing his local health authority has the highest rate of mental health problems in Northern Ireland:

My first thought was, ‘I’ll speak to an organization who works with people with mental health problems and see what they’re doing to tackle this, and what they would like to see the health trust do to tackle this as well.’

Soon after it started, however, the campaign deviated off course as mentees—despite their positive evaluations of SOJO—struggled to fully participate. It quickly became

clear that for many newsrooms, integrating an innovation such as SOJO would be an uphill battle. We had to abandon the campaign's original target of two solutions stories per month per reporter. In fact, most active mentees ended their six months of mentoring with two or three solutions-oriented stories and many of these, on rigorous vetting, did not strictly qualify as SOJO as defined by the SJN. In the following sections, we outline the major themes that explain the challenges that local newsrooms faced in implementing SOJO (RQ2) before explaining how they were able to incorporate it in their daily routines (RQ3).

Time and Workflow

Many local reporters told us that they lack the time to invest in any kind of in-depth journalism, including SOJO. As one told us:

There're only three news journalists in our paper. If I had to take an afternoon off on a Monday or a Tuesday to do some of this (SOJO), I'm passing on a workload to two other journalists who would have a list as extensive as, if not more extensive than, what I would be working from, so it was passing on the pressures.

Such stories remind us of the intense daily pressures that local journalists experience, having undergone huge staff layoffs in recent decades. Local newspapers are now expected to produce a similar product but with a fraction of the staff they previously enjoyed (Jenkins 2020). Amongst those employed with Newsquest we spoke to, 5–15 stories a day was the norm. There were cases in which mentees spent their own time over weeks doing a solutions story, only to give up in the end as they could not carry on under the daily pressure. As one reporter observed:

Our newsrooms are set up to respond very well to breaking news, and that's a large part of what we do, and trying to find time within your day in and amongst everything else that you're doing ... is perhaps one of the biggest challenges (to doing SOJO).

Within these accounts is the important observation that SOJO stories take more time than those that many local journalists typically produce. Consequently, for many local newsrooms, rather than fitting into their work routines, SOJO represented a disruption and a competition with the core business focus. Invariably, the core focus prevailed. As one reporter said, a "culture change" is required for journalists to be given time to fit SOJO alongside other commitments.

Metrics and Institutional Rewards

For the larger news organizations we worked with, metrics are built around and institutional rewards arranged to support the production of large volumes of content that can generate traffic. Journalists are, therefore, incentivized to produce stories that are quick to write and/or are likely to maximize page views. Our participating reporters told us that this has deleterious consequences for the quality of news, because they would have to prioritize certain soft topics (such as crime and property), clickbait and non-local, generic content. Given this, there was little incentive to produce SOJO. As one mentee lamented:

The thing that was constantly juggling was being able to achieve the pageview targets, which we're constantly told (to be) the most important thing, ... and just the amount of stories needed to populate the schedule every day.

Others highlighted how the positive nature of SOJO was fighting against the prevailing logics of metrics-driven culture, which—to their mind at least—privileges negative news agendas. As one mentee put it: “It’s all about driving web traffic. What that does is massively narrow the news agenda. That’s relevant because 90% of the content you find on local news websites now is negative in focus”. In justifying why they did not support their reporters to produce more SOJO, several editors told us that “bad news performs better”. Another editor said that “if you’ve got day-to-day targets, something has to give and what will give is something that hasn’t yet proven to drive print sales or subscriptions” (which was SOJO). One mentee was given time to produce SOJO stories but complained that:

Those stories just don’t do as well as the child molester or the dog attacking somebody, or ‘this happened in court’ (stories). It’s hard to look at those numbers next to each other on the same measurement board and not feel like you’ve done a terrible job.

Of course, the impact of stories can be measured beyond mere metrics. This is no truer than for SOJO, which explicitly aims to cause change through engaging audiences, policy-makers, and other stakeholders in developing solutions to common problems (McIntyre and Lough 2021). However, most reporters understood the impacts of their stories in anecdotal terms through “reading comments” online and the “meaningfulness of it” for their own practice. One mentee who wrote a series of SOJO articles on cycle lanes saw “the council making informed decisions and including it in their consultation”. But unless such impacts could be reliably quantified within the existing measurement systems—which they currently are not—they were liable to be ephemeral.

Editorial Commitment

Editors play a pivotal role in the success of embedding SOJO (Lough and McIntyre 2018, 2021) as they are responsible for allocating newsroom resources and shaping editorial agendas. We found that a small number of news outlets—particularly smaller, independently-owned and with less commercial orientation—supported their journalists to produce solutions stories. Most editors, however, left journalists to pursue this innovation on top of their existing workload. Some supportive editors had to make some “creative manoeuvres” to allocate time for their reporters to participate in the SOJO campaign. One, for example, allowed her reporter to have a separate SOJO day on his first day of return from annual leave, because she could continue with the temporary work pattern that was in place to cover his holiday absence.

As mentioned, all the editors were positive about the concept of SOJO. Yet despite this goodwill, they are themselves under immense pressure for eyeballs, clicks and profits, and it was a key tension at the heart of this SOJO campaign. Indeed, it was the primary lens through which some editors saw the value of SOJO.

Ultimately, we’ve got a business to run, haven’t we? We’ve got staff to pay, and we’ve got to make a profit ... to survive. And we are audience-led and we have to do what our audience wants really. I’d like to think we can maybe influence them to a certain extent. But ... if we

went out all out on hardcore solutions journalism at the moment, we'd lose quite a lot of readers.

Such quotes belie a hesitancy from editors to commit to something that may not guarantee benefits for the bottom line (see Nelson and Dahmen 2022). In such circumstances, editors found it difficult to create the conditions for reporters to produce solutions stories. In one typical account, “despite wanting it to succeed”, one editor admitted that “he [the reporter] was isolated in that he wasn't working with somebody to encourage him” and “my lack of knowledge and involvement in it was a problem”. Almost uniformly, when editors were asked about barriers to embedding SOJO in the newsroom they returned to resource:

Resource. Be-all and end-all. Whether that's time or staffing or budget resource. You can't deliver it half-heartedly. I do think if it's going to make a difference, you need to invest in it ... You may either sacrifice something else and that might be difficult because you'll be measured on that, or you get extra resource.

You might say, 'Well, SJN say you should have a reporter in the newsroom who is purely focused on solutions,' and I say, 'Give me more staff and I will have a solutions journalism reporter.' There's only three of us putting together a 72-page newspaper that 10 years ago was put together by 20. Yes, I will not have solutions journalism as a priority.

These accounts remind us that editors—while key actors—are still no more than a cog in a bigger machine that is not necessarily under their control. And in speaking of resource, many editors and reporters were of the view that SOJO—at least the model presented by the SJN—is better suited for well-resourced newsrooms than those found in the local sector. While one editor mooted partnerships with Facebook, Google or BBC as potential SOJO models that may work for local news, it was the incorporating of “some aspects of it into reporting” that was the principal emerging model of SOJO that we witnessed and is captured in our final theme.

“SOJO Lite”

In order to be included in the SJN Story Tracker, solutions stories must meet all four SOJO criteria (Solutions Journalism Network 2023b), and these four pillars are central to all of the training they do across the world, including that delivered to our mentees. So far, we have outlined some of the challenges that our newsrooms faced in implementing SOJO. But despite this, 170 solutions-based stories were produced over 12 months by 30 journalists. While this fell considerably short of our target of 600 stories, it still demonstrates some successful engagement with SOJO amongst our cohort and evidence of how news practitioners appropriated SOJO practice in daily routines (RQ3). However, many of our mentees articulated a diminished version of SOJO that rarely met the SJN standard of SOJO but represented the best they could do under the circumstances.

For some mentees, evidencing the impact of solutions beyond “just qualitative people saying they felt a positive change” was a challenge. Others were unable to “tick the extra box” of SOJO because they “just can't get hold of people to answer the questions. I think it's a case of trying to but not always achieving it”. For another mentee, “the scope of SOJO was just too big for me to be able to do with my daily work. I could only really pay lip service to it”. What emerged, then, was a pragmatic version of SOJO, adapted for the

“fast-paced environment” of local news. This was agreed by the project team and encouraged by mentors, who could see the obstacles faced by journalists in applying the SJN’s maximal model of SOJO. One editor described this model as “solutions journalism lite”. One of the mentors—an experienced solutions journalist—described this transition from the theory of SOJO to the reality of its implementation:

The issue was that ... they were doing it for a local newspaper ... Their stories had to make sense within that. It definitely made a big difference when we said, ‘We don’t have to tick every box of what constitutes a gold-standard solutions journalism story because that was just going to be impossible.’ We basically simplified it into something that was probably more ... constructive journalism, open solutions journalism perhaps. It’s just literally identify a problem ... and you’re going to talk about the solution. Just doing that ... makes it stand out in the context of a local newspaper.

“SOJO lite” thus takes several forms but is defined by meeting some of the SJN’s criteria for SOJO, but not others. One type of “SOJO lite” story was where a potential solution to a problem was identified, but the story lacked evidence of its efficacy, as it was too early to assess its effectiveness. Examples include a pilot scheme to introduce Fitbits for those with long Covid (Paterson 2021) and plans for a new shopping and leisure venue to revitalise the local high street (Rugg 2021). Another typical “SOJO lite” story was where the limitations of the solution were not discussed, such as one story about the deployment of mental health workers in Yorkshire GP surgeries (Laycock 2021). While they were only performing a form of “SOJO lite”, our more active mentees found satisfaction from incorporating solutions into their work and remained overwhelmingly positive about the practice. Indeed, many of our mentees told of how they will continue to adopt aspects of SOJO in their everyday reporting. As one mentee summarized:

Even if pieces don’t necessarily become full blown solutions journalism articles, the framework itself has been really, really helpful.

Discussion and Conclusion

Solutions journalism comes with promises of reconnecting audiences with the news, revitalizing civic engagement and even reversing some of the news industry’s economic travails (McIntyre and Gyldensted 2017; Meier 2018; Solutions Journalism Network 2021; Thier et al. 2021). Our study does not aim to challenge any of these claims. Instead, our aim was to document what happens when SOJO is newly introduced into local news, a sector that differs from better-resourced and national contexts that most previous studies have examined.

We found that as a practice, SOJO was received very favourably by reporters and editors (RQ1). All the journalists we spoke to were open to challenging established practices and spoke enthusiastically about the potential for SOJO, both in terms of connecting with their audiences and in performing their democratic roles. However, we also outlined several obstacles to conducting SOJO in the local news context, including time and workflow, metrics and institutional rewards, and editorial commitment (RQ2). Given its disruptive impact on newsgathering practices, we might have expected the context of the pandemic to be an obstacle to performing SOJO. However, the timing of our study (one year since the first lockdown and in the phase when the country was opening up)

may explain why this did not emerge as a theme. While certain obstacles (such as editorial commitment) have been touched on in previous research as a determining factor of SOJO success (Lough and McIntyre 2021), the appropriate *time* to research and source SOJO stories, for instance, is rarely mentioned in industry or academic discourses on SOJO. For the same reasons that investigative journalism is in retreat in many news sectors due to its demand on resources (Carson 2014), we therefore might find that SOJO struggles to establish itself in these sectors too.

Similarly, the impact of metrics and analytics on newsroom culture and institutional reward structures is now well established (Elsheikh, Jackson and Jebril 2024). These include concerns about metrics being used to both praise and discipline certain journalists (Bunce 2019), to hire and then promote journalists (ibid), and to push towards content strategies that journalists might be resisting (Lamot and Paulussen 2020). Together, these interventions can shape who is considered a “good journalist”, and who is afforded cultural capital within the newsroom (Bunce 2019). Our study, like others (e.g., Elsheikh, Jackson and Jebril 2024; Magin et al. 2021; Moyo, Mare, and Matsilele 2019), suggests that the institutionalization of metrics tended to support a negative, sensationalist and “soft news” agenda, that SOJO stories were struggling to compete with. To become embedded in such newsrooms, proponents of SOJO might need to win the argument based on analytics data.

Together, these findings suggest that despite good intentions and the will to enact cultural change, many journalists found that incorporating SOJO meant fighting against a machine that is programmed for speed and volume of outputs over depth and investigation. These observations therefore reflect a general “chicken and egg” conundrum that the UK’s local news industry is facing. On the one hand, to be socially and economically sustainable in the face of an endless flow of disruptive technology and audience consumption habits, they need to be at the forefront of innovative practices. This requires a resilient working environment where members are empowered to be confident and venturesome in fostering new ideas, technologies, and practices. It must create and promote incentives and facilitators for individuals to go outside the box to properly engage with the new.

On the other hand, the very problem that innovation aims to tackle—the decline of local journalism—is itself a tremendous barrier to innovation: it leads to a risk-averse attitude towards innovations that might not have an immediate business benefit but could sustain their democratic and commercial values in the long term. We found that the goodwill for SOJO as an innovation exists at all levels—from executives to journalists on the frontline—but there are few institutional incentives for it in local newsrooms across the UK. In our case, even though we started on a relatively good footing (with external funding to cover substantial adoption costs such as training and mentoring), the campaign did not end as fruitfully as planned due to the challenges described above. As one mentor commented in the WhatsApp group:

The big picture issue is the broken business model of traditional media especially at a local level. SOJO is one of many ways that audiences could be served better, which would start to address the trust and revenue issues - but we are not at a point where legacy media are prepared to reimagine how journalism is done. They are firmly aboard a sinking ship. They are trying to patch the leaks, but it will keep sinking without more systemic change.

Such impediments to implementing SOJO are, we argue, structural: they relate to the prevailing business model of large parts of the UK's local news industry, where chronically understaffed newsrooms are producing large volumes of news aimed to maximize audience metrics at the lowest possible cost (Firmstone 2016; Harte, Howells, and Williams 2018). Further, we argue that such barriers to successfully implementing SOJO, while perhaps more extremely felt in our research setting, are not unique to the UK or to local news. The move to digital has had deep ramifications for legacy newspapers across the world (Clark 2017; Harte, Howells, and Williams 2018; Nelson and Dahmen 2022), with local newspapers suffering the most from the fall in advertising revenues and related newsroom cuts (Firmstone 2016). In any context where journalists find themselves under pressure to churn out high volumes of stories with limited time for depth and investigation, we suggest that SOJO—at least the maximal model our participants were trained in—would struggle to thrive and to become a truly mainstream journalistic practice.

But our study also highlighted how solutions journalism could be implemented in ways that do not disrupt the institutionalized workflows (RQ3). Key to this was adapting the SJN's maximal model of SOJO towards what one editor characterized as "SOJO lite". For our participants, the emergence of this model was a pragmatic response that balanced their desire to implement a practice that they were enthusiastic about with their prevailing working conditions. Such findings connect to ongoing debates around definitions of SOJO and standardization of its practices. Here, studies emphasize the importance of field-level actors or meta-organizations including the SJN, that aim to generate a dominant model and set of best practices for news collaborations (Lowrey, Macklin, and Usery 2023). But models and ideas for change that are developed at the field level can often come into conflict at the local level, where most journalism is based. In order to endure, therefore, journalistic models such as SOJO must "be instantiated locally [and] this process introduces variation, as organizations respond differently to institutional change" (Heinze, Soderstrom, and Heinze 2016, 1142).

"SOJO lite", then, can be understood as a form of "translation" involving reinterpreting emerging norms and practices to ensure that they fit the needs of a particular organization or community (Heinze, Soderstrom, and Heinze 2016). An unresolved question here is how much translation field-shaping meta-organizations such as the SJN are willing to encourage. We would argue that the practice of "SOJO lite" is better than, ironically put, "SOJO nothing", as it still involves a mindset change that steers journalists to orientate the audience towards constructive solutions to societal problems. And more practically, it might be the only way that SOJO can be successfully integrated into badly resourced newsrooms and become truly mainstream.

Our study opens several avenues for further research. First, we believe there is value in studying contexts where SOJO is in different stages of being embedded in newsrooms. This should span from those newsrooms where it has reached maturation as a standard practice, to those who are experimenting with it, to those newsrooms who have tried and failed to implement it. This will give us a fuller picture of what the enabling factors are for successful implementation, alongside the barriers that certain newsrooms will likely face. Second, our findings have implications for SOJO audience studies. To date, the (mostly positive) consequences of exposure to solutions-oriented news have been through showing audiences the maximal model of SOJO. But if hybrid models of SOJO are

emerging in practice, then we should not assume that these consequences (and associated claims of SOJO's democratic value) apply in the same way. Only through experiments with different models of SOJO can we be confident of their impacts. Here, future research should move beyond online experiments and towards field experiments and other methods that better resemble everyday news consumption. Finally, there is scope, both theoretically and empirically, to expand our understanding of the emergent models of SOJO through studies of news output/ content, particularly through examining resource-poor newsrooms.

Notes

1. The project entailed three major activities over 18 months: (1) investigate what a pandemic-wounded public expects the media, especially local news, to do to help them out of the crisis in an informed, inspired and forward-looking manner; (2) develop and deliver a learning-by-doing campaign in which local news titles produce SOJO on community-based COVID-19 solutions; and (3) evaluate the overall value of SOJO for both the news industry and the public during the pandemic and their implications for the future of news.
2. Mentors were recruited and administered by the Association of British Science Writers (Project Partner) and were compensated for their time in the project.
3. Based on two articles per month per journalist, multiplied by six months, multiplied by 50 journalists (this target was decided between the researchers and the project partners).

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