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Educate Me:

The Use of Solutions Journalism in *The Seattle Times*' Education Lab

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Western Washington University

Honors Capstone

Podcast Link: <https://soundcloud.com/user-202190427>

Script:

You're listening to "Educate Me" a Western Washington University Honors Out Loud podcast.

I'm Audra Anderson, and today we will be exploring solutions journalism.

War, corrupt politics, mass shootings, racial inequality. All systemic issues America faces.

Legacy journalism norms value a concept of objectivity, yet coverage often contains implicit biases. Such biases can influence the message the audience draws from a story. The narratives in a story can determine whether it will make a difference, or whether it will be lost in a myriad of stories with the same skeleton.

Journalists were frustrated by those skeletons that addressed issues in a local context, focused solely on the problem, or framed tragedy and injustice by the positives that arose from them.

In came the idea of Solutions journalism. Though the term wasn't coined until over a decade later, the idea of solutions journalism began floating the field in 1998. In a model for solutions journalism I developed in fall 2019 using Wenzel, Gerson, and Moreno's study titled, "Engaging Communities Through Solutions Journalism," I determined there are two types of news story: solutions and non-solutions. In order to be considered solutions journalism, the story must be scalable and must include systemic critique. Non-solutions journalism stories must either be a

“good news story” in which they offer no systemic critique and are non-scalable, or a “bad news story” which is problem oriented.

Solutions journalism and investigative reporting share some key elements, but they are each at a different stage. Investigative journalism, “identifies social problems and names people in power who should be held accountable” while solutions journalism, “covers credible responses to social problems.

2013 saw the birth of international nonprofit Solutions Journalism Network. The organization aims to educate journalists on solutions-based reporting and writing. Nearing its seven year anniversary, the nonprofit has established nine communities in cities around the world, has integrated curricula into 17 journalism schools across the U.S., has worked with 208 news organizations on solutions-based reporting projects, and has trained more than 15,000 journalists. The same year Solution journalism network began, The Seattle Times partnered with the organization and launched a novel project called the Education Lab.

Today I am joined by former Managing Editor of the Seattle Times, Jim Simon. Jim was with the Seattle Times for 33 years, and was an integral part of the installation of the Education Lab in 2013. Despite his long track record, Jim didn’t always want to be a journalist. In fact, he thought he was going to be a geologist.

As for The Seattle Times, Jim has an extensive past.

The Seattle Times is the largest newspaper in Washington state, reaching 566,900 readers daily and 717,700 readers on Sundays in 2018 (Scarborough Report, 2018). The Seattle Times is owned by the Blethen Corporation, currently under the leadership of publisher Frank Blethen (The Seattle Times). The Blethen family began the newspaper in 1896. Since then, The Seattle Times has remained strictly independent and family-owned (The Seattle Times). Frank Blethen, who has worked in various positions at The Seattle Times since 1968, is a strong proponent of quality, public education (Blethen, 2014). In 2014, he gave a commencement speech to City University of Seattle, stating, “What would solve our dangerous inequity is an adequately funded, quality education system, accessible to everybody from age 3 to 23”

Journalism’s impact is often quantified by its “reach,” meaning an audience’s size and demographics (Powers & Curry, 2019). However, impact and reach are not synonymous because a larger audience size does not necessarily correlate to resulting change. Instead, a better way to quantify impact is audience engagement. And a key component of solutions journalism is its ability to increase audience engagement.

Aside from its ability to increase audience engagement, I asked Jim where solutions journalism fits in. Does it only address known, systemic issues rather than crack open issues most people don’t know about yet? He said...

The Education Lab’s five-piece series on school discipline was the first solutions-oriented project of its scale done by The Seattle Times.

According to my solutions journalism model, a key component of a solutions oriented story is that it contains systemic critique, and places the issue in a larger context. This diverges from Jim and the Seattle Times' usage of solutions journalism. The Times only considers a story solutions-oriented if it contains actual solutions. Other scholars believe solutions journalism must only meet the above criteria.

Solutions Journalism Network partnered with The Center of Investigative Reporting and The Engaging News Project to analyze the impact of The Seattle Times Education Lab project on school discipline (Rani, 2016). The study was based on the hypothesis that solutions journalism can change “the quality and tone of public discourse.” The study found, “While Education Lab did not introduce issues around school discipline to the political arena or public debate in Washington state, it did intensify a public conversation on alternative approaches to it, especially in community and ethnic media in the Seattle metro area” (Green-Barber, 2016). The Seattle Education Association also turned its attention to school discipline following the publication of the project (Green-Barber, 2016). The study also noted that, “elected officials reported that Seattle Times coverage of school discipline issues generated public support for reform and created the political opportunity for HB 1541 to pass.” HB 1541 was a bill focused on, “implementing strategies to close the educational opportunity gap” (Washington State Legislature).

Although the positive impacts of the Education Lab are plentiful, not everyone likes the idea of solutions journalism.

Although objectivity is a journalistic norm, it is a myth. Every quote, word, and source is biased. Journalists can strive for objectivity, but we will never fully reach it. My generation of journalists is beginning to catch onto this idea and reject the rigid and archaic binds of legacy journalism. This doesn't mean our stories will be riddled with opinion. Rather, stories that break from the traditional roles of journalism are more informed, more contextualized, and more engaging.

One defense against people that label solutions journalism as advocacy journalism is data. Much like investigative work, the best solutions journalism stories are based on data.

Solutions journalism does not always have to look like a breaking, four-part series with months-long reporting. It can be present in much more digestible stories. Contextualizing fast-turnaround stories with nationwide data and potential solutions can be a quick way to produce a more engaging and influential story.

That's Seattle Times staff writer Claudia Rowe, who reported the school discipline series for the Education Lab. Since the start of the Education Lab, the Times has launched two other solutions-oriented projects: Traffic Lab and Project Homeless.

Liza Gross, vice president of practice change at the Solutions Journalism Network said "It's not happy journalism — it's useful journalism."

Now, the education lab has stories relating to equity, teacher diversity, funding, and higher education and special education.

In 2018, the Education Lab published TEACHER DIVERSITY IN WASHINGTON STATE

Greater representation can improve outcomes for students of color. So why are 89% of

Washington teachers white?

This story on teacher diversity is an excellent example of solutions journalism and how it differs from investigative journalism. The story includes data as well as what it would take to achieve diversity in Washington state. An investigative piece would have stopped at the data, and how it illuminates a problem:

“Over the last five years, Washington’s schools have seen an 18 percent increase in the number of students of color — and a 2 percent decrease of white students. The growth of teachers of color, an increase of 32 percent, also outpaced the increase of new white teachers, which was about 10 percent.

Still, three out of every four teachers the state has gained over the past five years were white.

For students who identified as Latino or Hispanic, the state’s second largest demographic group, the difference is particularly stark. For every 88 Hispanic/Latino students last school year, there was only one Hispanic/Latino teacher.

By contrast, there is one white teacher for every 11 white students on average.

To fully represent today’s students, about 29,500 of Washington’s 64,700 teachers would have to be people of color. That’s about 22,300 more people of color than those who currently teach here.

If the number and racial makeup of students and teachers in Washington change at the same rate as they are now, it will be more than a century before the state reaches parity.

Why it matters:

Luis has her first and only teacher of color — her Spanish teacher, who she said is Cuban — at Fort Vancouver High School this year. State data from last year shows about 10 percent of the 79 teachers there identified with a race other than white — while students of color made up about 62 percent of enrollment.

“There are those teachers who do try and try their hardest, but there’s never been one who wouldn’t have to try,” the 17-year-old said.

The frustrations of students like Luis are backed by a growing body of research suggesting greater teacher diversity can improve outcomes for students of color.

There are many theories as to why. Among them: Teachers of color may be more likely to set higher expectations for students of color, as a paper published by the Economics of Education Review found.

A 2017 study of more than 100,000 black students in North Carolina found that low-income boys who had at least one black teacher in grades 3-5 were almost 40 percent less likely to drop out of high school and had a stronger interest in attending college.”

This story first finds a problem, highlights it, then explains why it matters and what the state would have to do to rectify the issue. Stories like these go through all the stages of a news story. A traditional news story would report on an already obvious problem. An investigative piece would do the work of finding a problem, but stop at highlighting it. This solutions piece does all that plus some.

Repetitive coverage can be emotionally draining and can foster a stagnant public opinion.

Journalists have grown used to writing stories with the same skeleton to maintain the myth of

objectivity. Solutions journalism can bring about positive change by enhancing knowledge and accountability, strengthening audience engagement, and restoring trust in a field desperately lacking it. It takes influential and reputable news organizations like the Seattle Times to help start a solutions journalism revolution. Like Jim said, solutions journalism cannot and should not replace all types of news stories. Breaking news, feel-good features, watch-dog and investigative pieces all have their place. But all these types of news stories can include elements of solutions journalism, and solutions journalism has taught us: Data drives a narrative, a problem isn't always enough, and people are tired of those same old skeletons.

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