Solutions Journalism

Fall 2017

Class Meetings: Monday, Periods 3-4 (9:35-11:30 a.m.) McCarty B 3124
Wednesday, Period 3 (9:35 – 11:30 a.m.) Weimer 1076

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Office Hours: Tuesday, Wednesday 1-3 p.m.
and by appointment. In general, it's best to make an appointment
to be sure that I'll be available to you when you come by.

About the Course

One of the most important roles journalism plays in society is to keep the public informed about societal problems, whether it's poverty, homelessness, drug addiction, suicide, teen pregnancy, wage stagnation, unemployment, climate change, racism or any of the seemingly hundreds of problems we face in modern society. Traditionally, in-depth stories about any of these problems focus on explaining the extent of the problem, who is most affected, what those effects are, and who or what caused the problem. Eventually, many stories get around to discussing proposed or attempted solutions to the problem. However, the solutions sections of these stories often center around who's supporting and who's opposing particular solutions, or they simply report that solutions are being tried, without offering much evidence about their effectiveness.

Solutions journalism stories, by contrast, **offers carefully researched reporting focusing on successful responses to social problems**; it requires and explains evidence supporting the effectiveness of a particular solution, going beyond simply reporting what advocates say about the approaches they're promoting. This is not "fluff" or mere "good news" reporting; it demands adherence to the highest standards of journalism.

What You Will Learn in this Class

- What is solutions journalism? What is *not* solutions journalism?
- How to use solutions journalism approaches to increase the impact of your reporting and increase audience engagement with your stories
- How to ensure that your reporting meets the highest standards of journalistic practice, avoiding advocacy, fluff and "hero worship" reporting
- What kinds of stories work with a solutions journalism approach

- How to "do" solutions journalism – how to find stories, how to find and evaluate the evidence, and how to structure the stories to make them as compelling as possible

Required Readings

Required: *No text is required. However, you are expected to do ALL assigned readings, including any that are added later in the semester. These will be made available through the Canvas site for the course or emailed to you, on occasion.*

Recommended: *You will be required to adhere to AP style in all of your assignments, so keep your AP Stylebook handy. Your written assignments also will be graded for spelling, punctuation and grammar, so make sure you have a dictionary available, if you need it.*

Other Resources

- Solutions Journalism Network website, www. solutionsjournalism.org. I would strongly suggest that you bookmark the site on your computers. In addition, you will be required to sign up for the SJN Hub, which gives you access to hundreds of solutions journalism stories in the SJN Story Tracker. It's free. I also would encourage you to sign up for the SJN email newsletter (at the bottom of the home page), follow the blog feed, and follow SJN on Twitter (@soljourno).
- *New York Times* Fixes blog
- *Solutions* journal. This is an academic journal, but many of the articles are pretty easy to read, and each article has a plain-language summary. It could be a good source for story ideas and data. It's also browsable by topic.

Class Policies

Classroom Atmosphere: Each of you plays an important role in shaping this course. I encourage you to be actively involved in class discussions and activities. Please also be appreciative of the contributions of others, including the guest speakers, and help create a class environment that is respectful and inclusive. This does not mean you should never disagree, but you should ***always*** do so courteously.

Cell Phones and Computer Use in Class: As a matter of courtesy to your fellow class members, please turn off all cell phones and pagers prior to the start of class. Likewise, ***all electronic devices should remain off*** except when we're doing online research or, perhaps, discussing a story that you're reading online. I strongly recommend that you take handwritten notes for the class; research documents that hand-writing your notes increases your likelihood of remembering and understanding the material. DO NOT *instant or text message during class.* Multi-tasking is not effective.

Attendance: I will not take roll for every class, but because the class is so small, you can be sure I will notice when you're missing. I reserve the right to lower grades due to excessive absences *or tardiness*. Class starts at 9:35, not 9:40. Your attendance and *participation* are important to making this class a success. I expect that you will attend every class unless an emergency prevents you from doing so. If you find that you do have to miss a class due to an emergency, let me know immediately.

Missing Deadlines or Assignments: In journalism, meeting assignment deadlines is vital. The same holds true in this class. If you believe you have an exceptional reason for missing a deadline, please discuss it with me *immediately* and *in advance*. Please note that poor planning, including underestimating how long it will take to set up and complete interviews, does not constitute an acceptable reason for missing a deadline. Fairness, both to me and to your classmates, requires that you

meet all deadlines. Unless we have agreed in advance to change your deadline, there will be a significant grade penalty, up to and including failure on the assignment. *All assignments are due promptly at the start of class. Failure to turn in your assignments at the start of class will result in a late penalty at a minimum.* Please print out your assignments the night before class, not the morning of, unless you are a very early riser.

Accommodations for Special Needs: If you have a legitimate, documented special needs situation, I am more than happy to work with you to find accommodations. University policy requires students requesting classroom accommodation to register with the Dean of Students Office. The Dean of Students Office will provide appropriate documentation to you, and you should provide this documentation to me at the beginning of the semester. Please do so, even if you do not believe you will need the accommodations. It is your responsibility to initiate this conversation <u>early</u> in the semester.

Plagiarism and Academic Honesty

Plagiarism on any writing assignment in the class will result in a failing grade FOR THE CLASS.

For the communications professional, there hardly exists a graver crime than plagiarizing another writer's work. In short, it is YOUR responsibility to make certain you understand what constitutes plagiarism and to ensure that you give proper credit <u>every time</u> you draw on someone else's writing.

- **Do not rely on what you think you've learned before.** I strongly recommend that everyone complete the free Poynter NewsU course called Avoiding Plagiarism and Fabrication.

- Prof. Mindy McAdam has put together an excellent guide: http://www.macloo.com/cheat/index.htm.

- **If you have questions, ASK <u>ME</u>!** There's no penalty for asking questions, but the penalties for plagiarism are severe.

- **Treat Internet sources like any other book, journal article or other print source.** Make CERTAIN you copy down correct reference information when you copy material from a website, EVEN if you're paraphrasing.

- **Upload ALL assignments to the e-learning site and know that I will submit them to Turnitin.com to check for plagiarism.** I also will want hard copies of your papers; if I don't tell you to skip printing an assignment out, please assume that I do want a hard copy.

- **DO NOT turn in to me ANY work you previously have submitted to another instructor or that you plan to submit for any other class at UF or any other institution.** If you want to write on a <u>topic</u> you've worked on before, that may be acceptable IF you discuss it with me and get permission IN ADVANCE.

Please see the UF Office of Student Judicial Affairs website for definitions of academic dishonesty (**http://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/honorcodes/honorcode.php).** The violations most likely to be potential problems for students in this class include plagiarism, misrepresentation and fabrication. It

is YOUR responsibility to understand what kinds of actions are prohibited. If a situation ever arises in which you think something you're contemplating MIGHT constitute one of these types of academic dishonesty, ASK BEFORE YOU DO IT. Apologies after the fact will never resolve the problem for anyone. I consider it part of my duty as a professor and as a journalism educator to report academic dishonesty to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs.

Course Grading and Assignments

I use minus grades so that individuals who do superior work receive GPA points reflecting that accomplishment. Grades will not be curved. You can see how letter grades relate to grade points assigned at this website. Final grades will be based on these break-points:

A- = 90-93.5%   A = 93.6%+
B- = 80-83.5%   B=83.6-87%   B+=87.1%-89.9%
C-= 70-73.5%   C=73.6-77%   C+=77.1%-79.9%
D-= 60-63.5%   D=63.6-67%   D+=67.1%-69.9%
E = 59.9% or lower

In general, I am reluctant to assign incomplete grades because they create an additional burden for both the student and the instructor for the following semester. In exceptional circumstances (e.g. serious illness), I may agree to assign an "I" grade. Your final grade will be determined by your performance on the following assignments:

SoJo/Imposter Analysis	40 points
Extreme Journalism Makeover Analysis	40 points
Problem Memo & Data Report	20 points
Problem definition story, 1st draft	50 points
Problem definition story, final draft	100 points
Spectrum of solutions story, 1st draft	50 points
Spectrum of solutions story, final draft	100 points
One solution story, 1st draft	50 points
One solution story, final draft	100 points
Final Solutions Journalism package	250 points
Other assignments, including quizzes	50 points
Class participation	150 points
Total	1,000 points

Assignments: You will receive more detailed instructions for each assignment. However, here's a basic rundown of each assignment so you'll have a sense of what each one entails.

SoJo/Imposter Analysis: You'll be asked to read a selection of stories. Some will be actual solutions journalism stories, while others will be "imposters" of various types. You'll be asked to identify which ones are imposters and to explain how and where each imposter story went wrong – which of the four qualities of solutions journalism are missing. For the solutions stories, you'll identify where/how each story demonstrates the four key qualities required for good solutions reporting.

Problem Memo and Data Report: This is the first step in writing your Solutions Journalism stories for the semester. This document needn't be especially long – not more than 2 pages. In it, you will describe clearly and in a focused way the specific social problem (e.g. opioid addiction, police violence, habitat loss for an endangered species, texting-related accidents, etc.) you want to write about. You should have sources for the information, but at this point, that information can come from documents or credible websites (e.g. the Centers for Disease Control or other government agencies, think-tanks like the Commonwealth Fund, etc.). The second – and critical – part of this memo is to identify sources of data that show how at least one approach to solving your chosen problem is working.

Extreme Journalism Makeover Analysis: Many traditional stories <u>could</u> be re-written as solutions journalism stories. For this assignment, you'll find a traditional news story about a social problem in any legitimate media outlet of your choice; explain how the journalist(s) could have done the story using a solutions approach. What evidence would they have needed, and where might they have found that evidence? What kind of sources would they need? What would the solutions angle be? (Hint: You'll need to do some reporting here to identify <u>real</u>, existing data and sources.)

Solutions Journalism story, in 4 parts: Ultimately, what you're going to end up with is one solid (I hope) solutions journalism story. However, to make the assignment more manageable, it's broken down into three preliminary stories, which you will then weave together to produce the final, complete story. Think of each preliminary story as a stand-alone shorter piece. Not everything in each of the three preliminary stories will be included in the final story, but going through the process of writing the earlier stories will set you up to have all the information you need for the final story. (Acknowledgment here to Prof. Jim MacMillan of Temple University, who designed this set of assignments.)

   Part 1 - Defining the problem: This story will be much like a traditional story about the social problem you've selected. (Hint: In choosing your problem, make sure you've identified that someone somewhere in the world has found a way of addressing this problem that seems to be working; there should be evidence [e.g. statistics, research, independent verification] that the solution is working – not just opinion.) The purpose of this story is simply to inform people about the problem – what is it, what causes it, who's most affected, how does it affect the rest of society indirectly, etc. You *must* interview at least **one expert source** and, ideally, **one "real-person" source** – someone who is experiencing (or has experienced) the problem personally.

   Part 2 - Spectrum of solutions: This story will describe at least three approaches that have been or are being used in response to the problem. You don't need to spend <u>much</u> time in this story explaining the problem. Instead, write this story as if you assume the reader has read your first story, but do include at least two-three paragraphs summarizing the problem. Include at least two expert sources; one of them should be **someone who works directly with individuals experiencing the problem**.

   Part 3 - One solution focus story: For this story, you'll describe in depth the approach that seems to be the **most successful** in addressing the problem you've chosen. It can be one you described in the previous story, or it can be something entirely new. You MUST be able to include evidence, other than individuals' opinions and anecdotes, demonstrating that this approach is effective. This story must include at least one new expert (not used in previous stories), **new data or resources**, and **one new "real-person" source**; ideally, this "real person" will be someone who has benefitted from the solution you're proposing.

Part 4 - Final multi-media solutions journalism story: This final story will incorporate material from the three previous segments. (Yes, you can copy and paste well-written sections of your previous stories.) The story will clearly define the problem you're discussing, including explanations of the primary causes. It will discuss briefly a range of solutions that have been used to attempt to reduce or eliminate the problem, but it will *focus* (Hint: **lead with**) on the solution you've discussed in Part 3. This story will include new material not included in any of the previous three. The ideal story will include "howdunnit" information discussing the process solutions managers went through to develop, refine and evaluate the solution, as well as talking about how they overcame challenges. **Your final submission should include at least one relevant video or audio clip you've collected through your reporting and at least three relevant photos, with captions**. Bonus points for including a highly relevant and appealing infographic or animation that helps to tell your story. You don't have to create this yourself – you can include a link to one you found through your research.

Quizzes, if necessary: I really don't like to give quizzes. I will only do so if it seems to me that people aren't reading the assigned articles. If everyone comes to class ready to discuss the readings, I won't give quizzes, and everyone gets 50 points "free" for the semester. Seems like a pretty good deal to me.

Class participation: You all play an important role in the success of the class. Come to class energized, prepared and ready to discuss the readings and the issues we're dealing with. Help each other out by sharing your knowledge. Each of you will know what the others are working on, so if you come across information or sources that might be useful to someone else, jot down a note or two so you can share that information with others. Bring in examples of good solutions journalism stories you run across or of stories that *could* have taken a solutions journalism angle but didn't. The benefit you receive from the class will be directly proportional to how much effort you put into it, and collectively, the whole class will gain more if everyone is fully engaged. We're going to shoot for having your stories published, which means there's potential for your classwork to benefit the entire community.

Schedule of Topics & Assignments

Date	Topic	Readings & Assignments Due
8/21, 23	Introduction – Syllabus review, goal discussions, personal introductions;	Read (by Wednesday): Solutions Journalism Toolkit, pgs. 4-9 (at least); Also read at least two stories from Temple University student-produced project "Living Free"
8/28, 30	Getting started: What SoJo is (and is not); Story types & initial questions for using SoJo; What's Working?	Read: Solutions Journalism Toolkit, pgs. 10-21; Framing; Finding a Solutions-Oriented Story; Vetting a Solutions-Oriented Story; Due 8/30: Solutions Journalism vs. Imposters assignment
9/6	The case for SoJo	Read: Stearns, Journalism's Theory of Change; Hammonds, Lab Test: Solutions Journalism Beats Brand X; Dyer, Is Solutions Journalism the Solution?; SJN, 10 Reasons Why We Need Solutions Journalism Due 9/6: Problem memo & data report
9/11, 13	Finding sources; Using fiction	Read: Review pg. 20, Solutions Journalism Toolkit;

	techniques to add life to your writing	Wilczek, Research strategy guide for finding quality, credible sources; Klems: The Secret to Writing Stronger Feature Articles; Talese: Frank Sinatra has a cold; Due 9/13: Extreme Journalism Makeover assignment
9/18, 20	Interviewing for solutions journalism; Focusing on HOW, not WHO	Read: SJN, Conducting Interviews for a Solutions-Oriented Story; Fancher, Appreciative Inquiry Interviewing; Tyre, The Writing Revolution; Due 9/20: Problem story draft
9/25, 27	How to know what's working; avoiding fluff, advocacy and "good news"	Read: Journalist's Resource, Statistical terms used in research studies; Academic research and studies; How to tell good research from bad: 13 questions journalists should ask
10/2, 4	Problem-solving week	Guest speaker David Biello. We'll also discuss each person's story focus, the problem, potential sources, solutions, etc. Due 10/4: Problem story final
10/9, 11	Reporting on failure	Read: McCann, Solutions Journalism is Biased! (And Other Myths); Tampa Bay Times, Failure Factories series; Roby, Press & Sun Bulletin, Reading, Writing & Results in Binghamton classrooms
10/16, 18	Looking for positive deviants	Read: Gertner, Positive Deviance; Wise, 9 Databases You Can Use in Your Solutions Reporting Due Oct. 18: Spectrum of Solutions story draft
10/23, 25	Shooting better video, and TBA – We'll see what we need at this point.	Guest speaker Houston Wells, 10/25
10/30, 11/1	Engaging with communities; Restorative narrative	Read: Tow Center, Engaging Communities Through Solutions Journalism; Holman, Engaging Communities Changes How Journalists Work; Sillesen, Building a new storytelling movement Due Nov. 1: Spectrum of Solutions story final
11/6,8	Structuring the SoJo story	Read: Solutions Journalism Toolkit, pgs. 28-41; SJN, Structuring a Solutions-Oriented Story; Due Nov. 9: One solution focus story draft
11/13, 15	Solutions Journalism in one day; SoJo your beat	Read: Solutions Journalism Toolkit, pgs. 24, 25
11/20	Individual meetings to discuss final stories	Due Nov. 20: One solution focus story final
11/27, 29	Pitching & promoting your solutions story	Read: Solutions Journalism Toolkit, pgs. 22-23, 42-44; SJN, Pitching a Solutions-Oriented Story
12/4, 6	Class wrap-up	Due Dec. 6: Complete SoJo story