

Journalism that restores power to the people

BY AMANDA WALDROUPE
STAFF WRITER

Car crashes. Robberies. Drug busts. Fires. A murder. These are topics of stories you might watch during the evening news, and it's enough to make you think the world is falling apart.

"If it bleeds, it leads" was the mantra to describe the derogatory attitude of what is, and is not, covered by journalism. This tends to be stories about societal or government dysfunction, corruption, problems.

But what about the solutions to those problems? Will we ever feel optimistic about our news again?

David Bornstein is the CEO and co-founder of the Solutions Journalism Network. He's also co-author of the New York Times' weekly "Fixes" column, which highlights a solution to a social problem each week.

Solutions journalism tells rigorously reported stories about solutions to social problems. It also analyzes any known impacts – how many people are affected, at what cost, are there any unintended consequences, can such a solution can be replicated in other communities, and so on.

You could say that solutions journalism is good news, with proof to back it up. And there's an entire network of journalists and educators that advocate for this approach. The Solutions Journalism Network, founded in 2013, trains journalists to report solutions-oriented stories and supports newsrooms, freelancers and university journalism programs that do so.

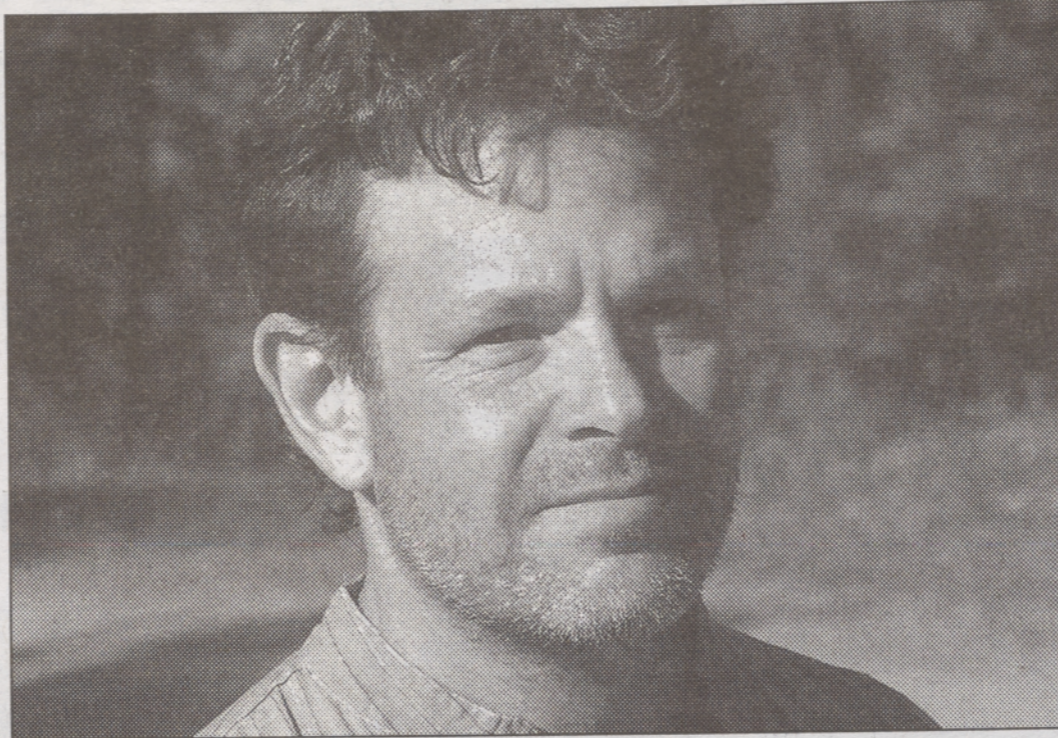
In November, I was among more than 80 journalists and educators to attend the Solutions Journalism Network's first summit in Provo, Utah. While there, I spoke with Bornstein about solutions journalism and its potential to combat the negativity and cynicism that has become prevalent in our society.

Amanda Waldroupe: *How do you define solutions journalism?*

David Bornstein: It's rigorous reporting about responses to social problems, the results they're getting and trying to understand, if they are getting better results, how they're getting that. At its best, it should be showing people in communities what their options are to try to address problems without advocating for one particular approach. People should know what their options are.

Oftentimes, people are far more aware of the problems that they have and far more outraged. The thing that's missing is not added outrage. If you add outrage to outrage, you get fatalism, and people tune out, burn out. At a certain point, when people are aware of a problem and they care and they sense there's urgency, what's missing is "what do we do?" Individuals can't go around the country and gather ideas. But news organizations can.

A.W.: *There are some who are skeptical of solutions journalism and say that it is, essentially, advocacy journalism.*



New York Times columnist David Bornstein is co-founder of the Solutions Journalism Network, which advocates for stories that don't just reveal problems but show how they can be solved

D.B.: I think "advocacy journalism" is an oxymoron. I don't think there is such a thing. There is advocacy and there is journalism. They are completely different. Journalists shouldn't be advocating because that defeats the whole purpose of journalism.

The difference is humility. Our knowledge of something at any point in time is inadequate. You're doing the best you can with the knowledge you have. Anyone who advocates for a particular approach to a problem assumes way too much information. That's their job. No one is pro lead paint. The humility in covering these things, from what we see today, this approach seems to be getting these results. That's as far as you go.

A.W.: *I wonder whether information about solutions is something that Americans would have gotten somewhere else, from another institution perhaps, a couple decades ago, or however long back.*

D.B.: It's really hard for people to hear about what's going on on a regular basis. Then there's the general community feedback system that we call the news. When it comes to issues that are affecting our community, we should be on a regular basis getting information that helps us understand how we can have more power against those problems. Our civic leaders or whoever will decide which of these things makes sense and go forward with. But they need the inputs to field those debates.

A.W.: *In the pre-Internet era, when print journalism was still the predominant way that people read the news, reading the newspaper was very much part of a person's daily routine,*

and one of the main ways that people received information. But now that the internet exists, there is this problem of where to look.

D.B.: There's too much.

A.W.: *And the proliferation of information presents a different problem of how we distinguish between good information versus bad information.*

D.B.: That's the crucial role news organizations should play. Let's say your community has a problem, as many do, with high school drop outs. There are thousands of schools around the country. In order to find the 2 percent of smartest schools that we should be learning from, you have to find those schools, vet them to see if their success is real and not a made-up story, look and see how they did it, then take that information and turn it into stories that are accessible and make them

locally relevant. That's a really interesting job. The journalist becomes this interpreter, in a way, of information out in the world for your community, about how we make these stories meaningful.

A.W.: *You write quite a bit for the "Fixes" column. When you work on the stories you're writing about, what's the reaction you get from your sources, who otherwise might be interviewed for stories that are more negative?*

D.B.: What makes a story interesting is that these are problem-solving narratives. You could think of them as quest narratives: How do we solve the case of the drop-outs? It's a detective story. This school had a drop-out rate of 50 percent. And now it has a drop-out rate of 12 percent. Let's say that's a true statistic. The question is, how? What

happened? Are we talking about a charismatic principal? Or are we talking about specific things, like changing the teaching approach or the culture of the school? They did many things, and there were many obstacles. There are all these details. When you're asking sources about these questions, they realize that you're genuinely curious about the process.

A.W.: *And readers see how they can do that very same thing.*

D.B.: The details are crucial. And if you look at all these TV shows that people are addicted to – "CSI," "House" – there are so many forensic details. They have beautiful people looking at microscopes. It's always Hollywood-ized. But basically, people are doing hard things that are really meaningful in this winding road of struggle, with setbacks and interesting insights and false assumptions and then discovering something they had never thought of and trying it out and getting the result that they hoped for or something close to it, then saying, "Let's try this in two places instead of one." It's how the human race has evolved from living 40-year life spans to 80-year life spans.

A.W.: *I would imagine solutions journalism offers some hope to readers, which is something that Americans sorely need right now. We have a president who is constantly saying that things aren't working. That's a dark message to hear.*

D.B.: We have a press that has been saying that for 40 years, long before our president came along.

If you do a sentiment analysis on journalism looking at the negativity and the tone of journalism, it took a downward turn in the early 1970s. Essentially, because of Vietnam and the Watergate scandal. Journalists had been too deferential to power, and you had a shift to "we're no longer going to go easy on these guys," and journalism turned into "all we're going to do is point out the spin and look behind the curtain." You had this extremely cynical tone that entered journalism, which has been hitting people with a stream of dysfunction and cynicism for 40 years.

A.W.: *The Watergate scandal and the Vietnam War also fueled investigative journalism. Do you think that journalism can still perform its watchdog role – of holding public officials and institutions to account – but without the cynicism?*

D.B.: Cynicism is not helpful. Skepticism is really helpful. Journalists should absolutely have to be skeptical. But people started criticizing everything. That was an overcorrection for what had been too much deference to officialdom before that.

The pendulum swung, and now it has to be swung back a little. It doesn't mean we're going to give up and soften the news. No. That is not the answer. We don't want to soften news. We want to balance out the traditional watchdog role, which shows people the things they should be concerned, perhaps outraged, about with the new

READ ABOUT SOLUTIONS

The Solution Journalism Network's **Solutions Story Tracker** lets you search more than 2,000 news stories reporting on responses to social problems worldwide. Visit storytracker.solutionsjournalism.org

To read a selection of **Street Roots' solutions reporting**, visit news.streetroots.org/solutionsjournalism