

Solution-focused News Increases Optimism, Empowerment and Connectedness to Community

BACKGROUND

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A significant percentage of people say they are exhausted by negative, sensational news and report that a barrage of negative news leaves them feeling helpless, hopeless and deflated. In a previous study, our team quantified some of the effects. We found that just 3 minutes of negative news in the morning can increase someone's chances of having a bad day by 27%—as reported 6-8 hours later. A brief exposure to negativity in the morning can have lasting consequences.

But this is just half of the story. Changing the way a news story is covered—specifically, shifting the focus from merely reporting problems to additionally highlighting potential or actual solutions—has positive outcomes on the brain. In a follow-up study, we found that solution-focused reporting increased news readers' problem solving skills by 20%, not to mention those articles made people feel less anxious and more energized.

During this study, we aimed to further understand the implications of focusing news coverage on solutions, this time in a city that desperately needs them. Detroit has been plagued by problems including poverty, failing schools, and violence. In the midst of these struggles, what would happen if residents of the inner city and surrounding communities were exposed to a deep discussion of solutions? We sought to find out, and the results were remarkable.

SUMMARY FINDINGS

Research participants who perceived the presented solution as being effective rated themselves as feeling 12% more energized, 16% less anxious, 10% more connected to the community, 14% more confident that conditions will improve, 15% more confident that they can come up with solutions when problems arise, and 18% more confident that Detroit is getting better day by day.

PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

Participants who saw the presented solution as effective, felt 12% more energized, 16% less anxious, 18% more confident that Detroit is getting better day by day, among other results.

The Solutions Journalism Network (SJN) supports and connects journalists interested in doing solutions journalism, rigorous reporting about how people are responding to problems. It does this in three ways: (1) advising and supporting media outlets around the country in creating high-impact solutions reporting projects; (2) developing educational tools and resources to build journalists' skills in solutions reporting and editing; and (3) connecting and supporting those interested in how social problems are being solved. So far, SJN has trained more than 75 news organizations worldwide.

The Detroit Free Press is the largest daily newspaper in Detroit, read by millions of people each month. In 2016, the newspaper partnered with the Solutions Journalism Network to create a series of reports on solutions entitled "Free Press Special Report: Could These Solutions Help Detroit Kids?" This groundbreaking series took an in-depth look at what it's like to grow up in the inner-city, and potential or actual solutions that could significantly improve that experience by tackling some of the biggest challenges.

METHOD

Research participants (N=512) were subscribers of the Detroit Free Press. Each was asked to read one of four randomly assigned news articles that recently appeared in the newspaper. One article focused on a problem, in this case the amount of violence children face in Detroit. The other three articles were part of a special solution-focused series and presented a community problem paired with a successful solution.

Both before and after reading the assigned article participants responded to questions testing their mood, feelings of empowerment and connectedness to their community, as well as their perceptions of their community's feelings of empowerment and connectedness. Those in the solutions condition, were also asked to rate the perceived effectiveness of the solution presented in the article.

The final ratings (after reading the article) of the problem and solution-focused groups were then compared after statistically controlling for ratings made before reading the article. Additionally, we examined whether ratings of perceived effectiveness of the solutions was related to changes in mindset.

The following articles were used for the study:

Article 1 – (Problem-focused): Describes the extent to which children in Detroit are subjected to violence in their communities.

Article 2 – (Solution-focused): Focuses on The Manhood Development Project in Oakland, California school districts, which provides mentoring and support particularly for at risk African American boys.

Article 3 – (Solution-focused): Tells the story of the Friends of Children in Portland, Oregon, which provides mentoring for 12 years starting in Kindergarten for children from chaotic households who need extra support.

Article 3 – (Solution-focused): Describes how the Safe Streets program operating in the poorest, most dangerous neighborhoods in Baltimore utilizes ex-cons to reach out to drug dealers and gang members to try to steer them in a different direction.

An abbreviated PANAS (Clark & Tellegen, 1988) scale was used to test the extent participants were experiencing four different positive and negative moods, including levels of energy, relaxation, tiredness and anxiety. Additionally, participants rated the extent to which they agreed with statements to measure feelings of self and community empowerment, self and community connectedness and optimism about the future of the community.

The solution-focused group experienced statistically significant greater levels of self-efficacy, energy, and connection to their community.

Statements included:

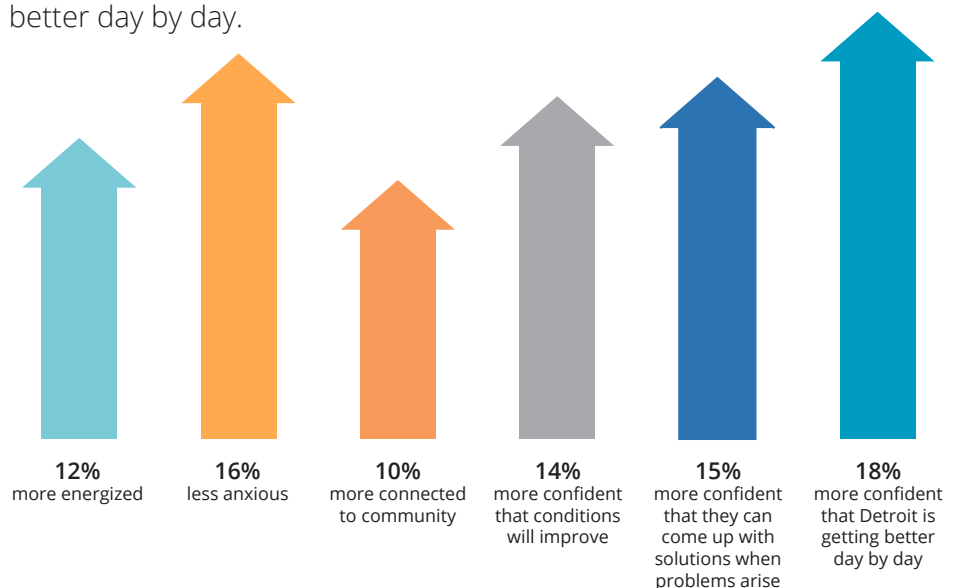
- I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort.
- When problems arise in the community, we are able to come up with solutions.
- I feel connected to my community.
- People in my community are interested in how other people feel.
- Detroit is getting better day by day.

RESULTS

As compared to those who read an article focusing on problems in the community, the solution-focused group experienced statistically significant greater levels of self-efficacy, energy, and connection to their community, when controlling for their scores before reading the article.

For the solution-focused group, the higher the rating of perceived effectiveness of the solution, the higher the ratings of self-efficacy, energy, and connection to their community.

As compared to those presented with the problem article when controlling for their scores before reading the article, those who perceived the presented solution as being effective rated themselves as feeling 12% more energized, 16% less anxious, 10% more connected to the community, 14% more confident that conditions will improve, 15% more confident that they can come up with solutions when problems arise, and 18% more confident that Detroit is getting better day by day.



DISCUSSION

Opening the mind to the fact that others have overcome similar challenges and been successful is an effective way to catalyze positive change, as it creates a greater sense of hope and optimism. These findings appear to provide more supporting evidence that focusing on solutions instead of merely problems leaves people feeling better and more connected to their community, as well as better positions them to take positive action.

One especially interesting aspect of the results was the role played by the participants' perceived confidence of the effectiveness of the solution. The more convinced they were the solution was good, the greater the positive effect the article had on their mindset. This finding suggests that when journalists report on solutions to community problems that have proven successful, they can prime mindsets for positive action best by rendering a convincing description of the programs' effectiveness. In other words, the journalist holds incredible power to positively influence the community through story selection and the way it is presented.

Further research is needed in the following areas: (a) determining the elements that enable journalists to effectively tell compelling solution-focused stories and further increase positive effects on the community, (b) identifying the behavioral effects of calls-to-action included at the end of articles such as donating, volunteering, and/or raising awareness about an issue, and (c) understanding more about likelihood to share these articles with networks and the impact that has on behavioral change.

AUTHORS' NOTE

We thank you for your interest in this research and the global implications it can have for helping us all solve our world's toughest challenges. We are always interested in hearing how you are using this research, any success stories you've seen related to it in your own work, and ways to collaborate to understand this topic more deeply. We can be reached through the contact form at transformativejournalism.com.

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