

Solution-focused Journalism Increases Meaning at Work, Team Pride and Job Satisfaction for News Professionals

SUMMARY FINDINGS

Solutions Journalism (SoJo) created a positive mindset shift for news professionals, especially reporters. Reporters taking part in the SoJo program experienced significant increases in job meaningfulness, team pride and connection with coworkers relative to those in the control condition. Specifically, SoJo reporters were 3 times more likely to report increased meaning in their work and nearly 2.5 times more likely to report increased pride in being on the team.

News professionals using solutions journalism also became promoters of the approach, with 100% of them agreeing to the statement: “If I were training a young reporter, I would introduce them to the concept of solutions journalism,” and 87% believing that “solutions journalism is the answer to what many news consumers complain about—rampant negativity in the news.” Please see the results section below for the full findings from this study.

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BACKGROUND

Solutions Journalism (SoJo) is an approach to covering the news that focuses on rigorous reporting on the ways people are responding to problems. Previous studies, including our own, have shown using a solution-focused approach to news coverage can have positive psychological effects on news readers and viewers including significant increases in optimism, energy, self-confidence, and connection to the community. In this study, we aimed to investigate the impact of solutions journalism on the mindset of the journalist.

The goal of this study was to measure attitudinal changes experienced by journalists who took part in a SoJo project. In partnership with the Solutions Journalism Network, we tested news professionals on mindset measures including optimism, empowerment, engagement,

and work satisfaction to understand how their mindsets changed after taking part in a solutions journalism project, as compared to a control group who did not take part in the SoJo project. We also surveyed those who took part on how effective they believe solutions journalism is as a component of news reporting. Our hypotheses was that the SoJo program would lead to increases in a number of measures compared to controls. We also predicted participants would find the SoJo program beneficial.

PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

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.

METHOD

Participants. Research participants (N=33) were news professionals from six news organizations: The Baltimore Sun, Minneapolis Star Tribune, Ms. Magazine, Northern Light, Richland Source, and WNYC. Funding for the SoJo training, projects and this study came from a grant from the Einhorn Family Charitable Trust. Roles included reporter, producer, news director, assistant director, and social media. The experimental group was trained by the Solutions Journalism Network and subsequently engaged in a SoJo project that lasted on average six months. Project participants were selected by management at each of the organizations or volunteered for the project. Topics included an in-depth look at Islamophobia and its effects on community members, the fairness of the rent court system, and infant mortality. Each team reported on the issue and then investigated potential solutions to the problem. Sometimes news organizations ran features on similar communities using effective

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solutions which could be imported to their area. The control group went on with their jobs “as usual.” Eighty-six percent of respondents had not heard of solutions journalism before the training.

Procedures. Each newsroom manager distributed the survey link by email, asking for all news professionals involved in the SoJo project (N=23) and others not involved (N=10) to respond. All responses were anonymous, with journalists only being asked to identify their newsroom and role.

Measures. We prepared a survey using items from validated measures and additional questions to test the change in mindset and attitude related to job satisfaction and to measure specific attitudes toward the solutions journalism program. The questions about change in job satisfaction included items for job meaningfulness (i.e. “My job is meaningful.”), overall job satisfaction, team pride, optimism about future, connection to coworkers, and connection to readers/viewers. Participants responded to how much their mindsets changed over the time period of the SoJo project on a 5 point Likert scale (1 = Much less, 5 = Much more).

Those participants who took part in the SoJo project were asked additional questions pertaining to their views on solutions journalism as an approach to news coverage, and its impact on their effectiveness as a journalist. Participants were asked to rate on a 7 point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree) statements such as that SoJo gave them an opportunity to “open people’s minds” more, made them a “more effective” journalist, that they’ve received “positive feedback” on their stories, they would use SoJo in future reporting, and it is the answer to a common complaint—“rampant negativity in the news.” The SoJo news professionals were also asked free response questions about solutions journalism.

ANALYSIS

In order to determine the impact of the solutions journalism, we compared those who participated in the solutions program with those who did not on job satisfaction and journalist effectiveness using independent samples t-tests (two tailed). To determine SoJo

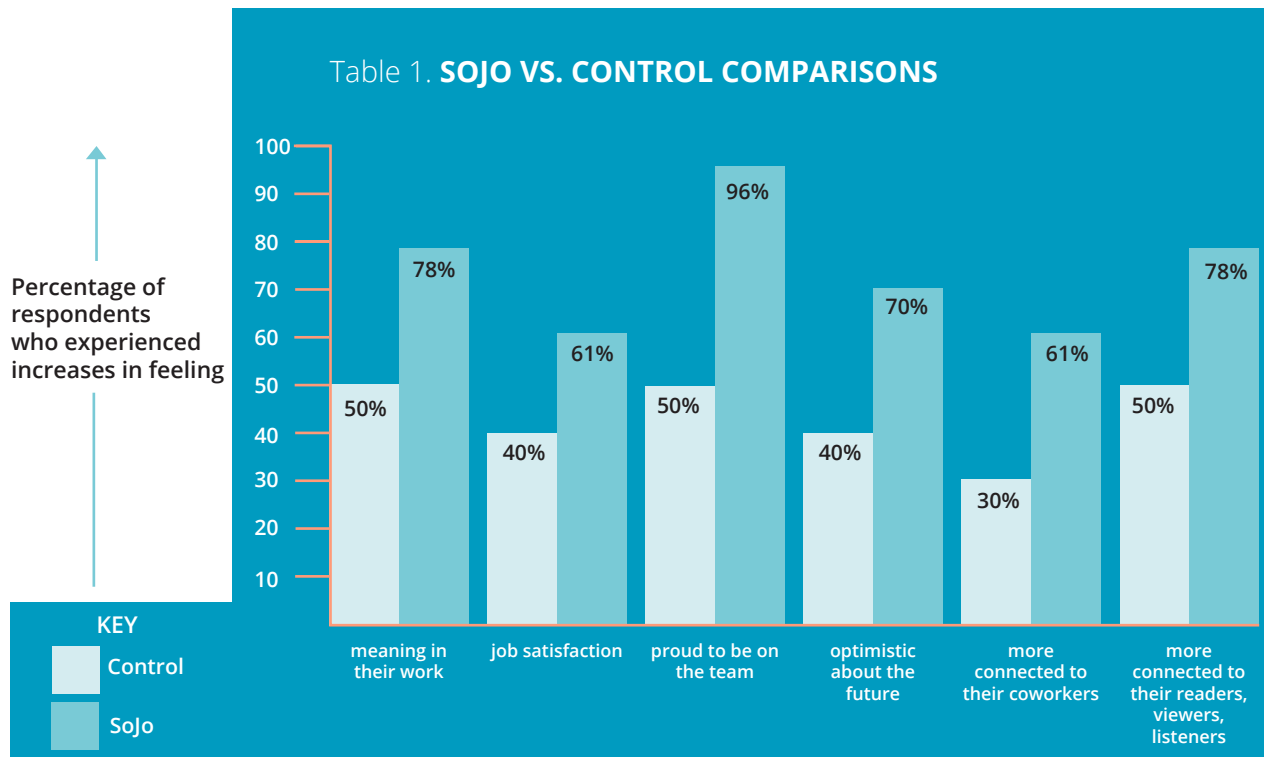
participants' attitudes and experiences of the program, we used a one sample t-test (two tailed) comparing their responses to a neutral response.

We repeated the analysis with only those participants identified as reporters in both the experimental (N=7) and control (N=4) because we hypothesized they would be the most closely involved and therefore most affected by the project.

RESULTS

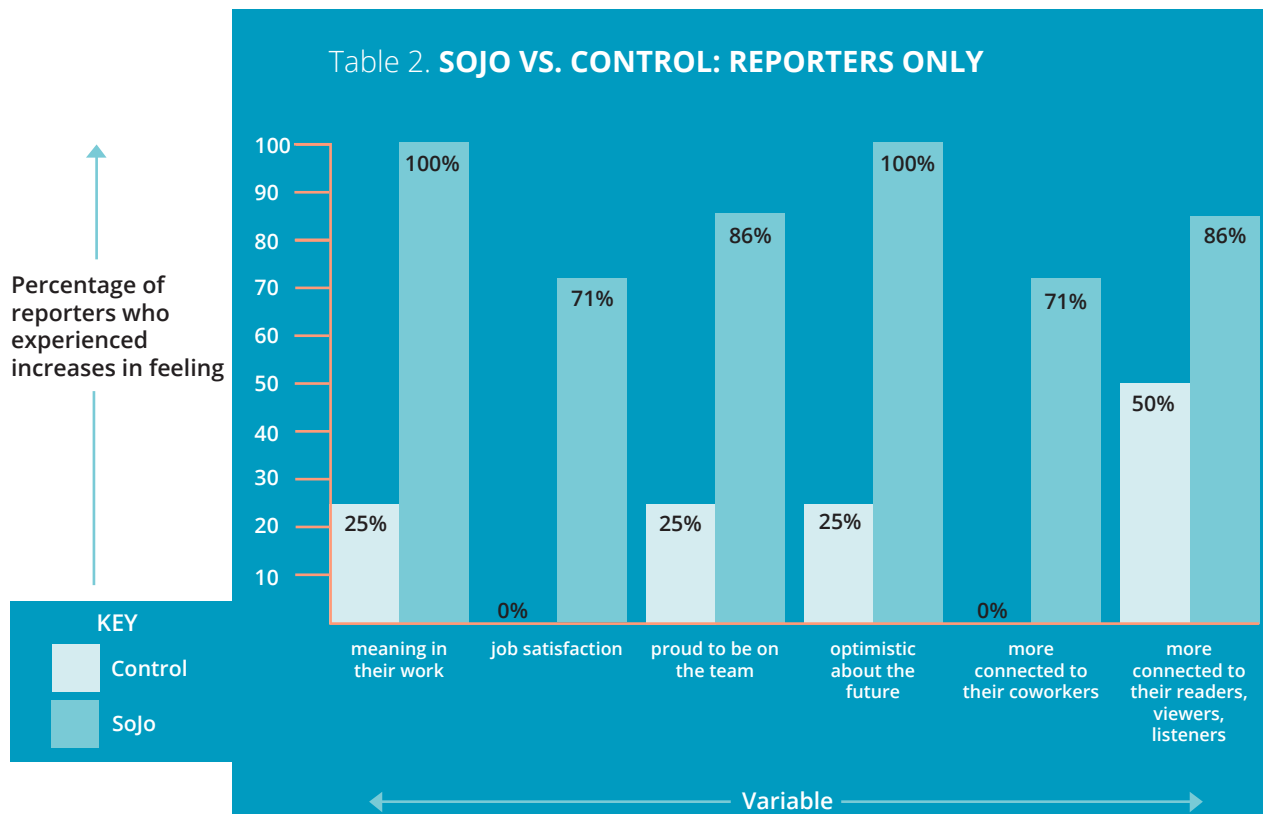
SoJo vs. Control Comparisons

SoJo participants reported experiencing greater increases over the six-month period of connectedness to viewers/readers than controls, $p = .02$ (2-tailed), with 78% feeling an increase in connectedness compared to 50% of controls feeling an increase. SoJo participants also felt marginally greater increases in job satisfaction, $p = .07$, team pride, $p = .06$, and connectedness with coworkers, $p = .08$. See table 1 for a breakdown of percentages of participants who experienced increases in each of the measures.



SoJo vs. Control: Reporters Only

Reporters who participated in a SoJo project felt greater increases in job meaningfulness, $p = .02$, team pride, $p = .004$, and feelings of connectedness with coworkers, $p = .02$, than control reporters and marginally greater increases in job satisfaction, $p = .06$, and optimism, $p = .096$. See table 2 for a breakdown of percentages of participants who felt increases in each of the measures.



Ratings of the SoJo Program

SoJo participants agreed that the program was effective on all dimensions, all p 's < .001. See table 3.

Table 3. PERCENTAGE OF SOJO PARTICIPANTS WHO AGREED WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS

I've had more opportunity to open people's minds to the possibility of positive change.	87%
I feel more connected to the community when sharing positive solutions that members of the community were engaging in.	96%
I have received positive feedback from readers/viewers/listeners regarding solution-focused stories.	100%
Using solutions journalism, I am a more effective journalist.	87%
This project has fundamentally changed how I view my ability to effectively cover an issue.	83%
Solutions journalism provided a new and better way to approach news coverage.	91%
Solutions journalism provided a new and better way to tackle an issue journalistically.	87%
I plan to use solutions journalism in future reporting.	91%
If I were training a young reporter, I would introduce them to the concept of solutions journalism.	100%
Solutions journalism is the answer to what many news consumers complain about—rampant negativity in the news.	87%

Free Response Questions

In response to the question which asked them to **list any ways in which solutions journalism benefited them**, several of them said SoJo provided them with a “framework” and “helped focus our work.” One reporter described SoJo as allowing him/her to “pull back the curtain” on a traditional story. Multiple respondents described how the “tools and resources” helped them “report beyond the issue,” explore “what might work,” and give readers “tools for change.” One said he/she felt part of the process by at least offering a “forum to raise possible solutions.” Another described how it has allowed him/her to “be more aggressive in pushing for solutions.” One journalist said the project gave a “carrot to employees who want to be recognized for similar work” and “set the standard” in the newsroom.

When asked **what advice they would give to journalists interested in SoJo**, nearly every answer was extremely enthusiastic about it, and no one was negative about it. “Do it!” and “absolutely adopt the method” were common answers. One journalist said he/she would use it as a way to engage audiences. Several mentioned that it is helpful to have a “comparison city/country/locale” that has already found a solution, and one reporter said you need to be “willing to travel.” Almost half talked about how this requires “rigorous reporting,” the need for being “skeptical,” and going beyond just “describing what’s in front of you.” One put it succinctly: “Take the extra time, go the extra mile, ask the extra question.” Another encouraged fellow journalists to “take the time to thoroughly understand your issue before reporting on it so you can offer real solutions.”

And in response to a question about any **positive outcomes from the SoJo project**, every newsroom had a positive story to share. Audience engagement was up on social media, and multiple respondents talked about receiving “the most encouraging feedback” and “incredible letters” from the community. A journalist from Ms. Magazine said readers were tagging friends on social media in the comments section to help share stories, and more than 80 people signed up for a follow-up webinar on the featured topic. A video created by the Minneapolis Star Tribune of kids talking about the effects of Islamophobia on them went viral with more than half a million views. The Richland Source reported on infant mortality and help spread a “Baby Box” project from

California to Ohio. The Baltimore Sun's series prompted an inactive city commission to look into investigating rent court and other housing issues, a housing non-profit is setting up a panel discussion about the featured issue, and judges positively responded to the series.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the findings were supportive of our hypotheses. SoJo participants reported increased connection to readers/viewers relative to control participants. Reporters taking part in the SoJo program reported increased job meaningfulness, team pride and connection with coworkers relative to reporters in the control condition. Even the measures that did not reveal significantly greater increases among SoJo participants relative to controls did reveal moderate to large effects sizes suggesting that the lack of statistical significance may be due to the small size of the sample. Also, SoJo participants agreed that the program was effective on all dimensions measured.

The findings of this study deepen our understanding of the positive impact that adopting a solution-focused approach to news coverage can have on newsroom professionals. Given that some journalists find the field of journalism grueling and depressing, as they try to survive staff cutbacks, fewer resources, and salary cuts, this study shows that finding other "rewards" for a job well done pays dividends. For some journalists, even more important than a salary bump is fueling the part of them that lead them to get started in the business in the first place: the chance to make a positive difference in the lives of others.

A fascinating note about the findings: There were significant results across newsrooms focusing on very different topics from one another. Whether the topic was Islamophobia or an investigation on rent court, journalists dedicated to SoJo reported similar positive mindset changes.

There were some limitations in this study including non-random selection and a small sample size with an unequal number across groups. However, even with such a small sample the effect size of the SoJo was large enough to render significant and marginally significant group differences on several measures, particularly for reporters.

When asked what advice they would give to journalists interested in SoJo, **nearly every answer was extremely enthusiastic** about it, and no one was negative. "Do it!" and "absolutely adopt the method" were common answers.

Even the non-significant comparisons showed large group differences suggesting a larger sample would yield statistically significant differences for those as well. In future studies, greater adherence to random selection is necessary to rule out the possibility of group difference being an artifact of preexisting individual motivational differences.

FURTHER RESEARCH

While the current study focused on the program's impact on individuals, further research is needed to understand the impact on the newsroom ecosystem. Since we know that individual changes do not often occur in isolation, it is plausible to think that SoJo implemented by a few individuals in a newsroom may also impact the culture at large.

Additionally, in previous research we've seen that exposure to solutions journalism reporting can have positive effects on readers/viewers. Future related research could investigate the impact of SoJo stories on the positive action of readers/viewers including behavioral change, volunteering, raising awareness and donating; and the influence of SoJo on "negative news fatigue" for news consumers.

We are always open to ideas and collaborations. Please use the contact form at **michellegielan.com** to reach out if you have ideas or comments.