



THE LONDON SCHOOL  
OF ECONOMICS AND  
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

## Engaging Audiences Through Solutions Journalism: Effects on Mood, Behaviour and Attitude Toward the Newspaper

Delphine Ruaro

*Msc International Management, 2016-2017. Distinction*  
*delphineruaro@gmail.com*

**Abstract:** Solutions journalism has recently seen a surge of interest due to audiences and journalists' disinterest for the prevalent negative and problem-focused news. Practitioners hope solution-focused stories can positively impact readers' engagement with the news and mobilization around societal problems. In this study, an experiment is conducted to explore the effects of two reporting styles – problem-focused (traditional journalism) or solution-focused (solutions journalism) – on readers' mood, intent to support the cause and appreciation of the newspaper. Results revealed that solutions journalism enhanced readers' positive affect, preference for similar stories, and attitude toward the newspaper. No significant impact was found on readers' arousal, intent to support the cause and perceived credibility of the newspaper. These findings support the argument that solutions journalism has a positive impact on audiences' mood and newspapers' brands.

**Keywords:** solutions journalism, constructive journalism, newspaper, mass communication, news

## 1. Introduction

Traditional media as we know it is currently facing a crisis. Sales and diffusion have decreased by 17% through the past years in Western Europe and the United States (Halimi, 2012). A 2008 survey in the United States showed that 59% of newspapers had reduced full-time newsroom staff and 56% anticipated more cuts in the coming year (Pew Research Center, 2008). Newspapers have lost the confidence of their readers (CEVIPOF, 2016), and the majority of people now sees the media as a tool to manipulate individuals in the interest of political or business sponsors. A major criticism of newspapers comes from the public's perception that journalists "unfairly dwell upon conflict and failure" (Benesch, 1998) and focus too much on negative news (AFP, 2014). These criticisms are justified: newspapers have been evidenced to be negatively biased (Gyldensted, 2011; Robinson and Sheehan, 1983; Patterson, 1996) and to have a negative effect on readers (anxiety, fatigue) that even the United Nations have denounced (Jackson, 2016). Bad news has even been shown to negatively alter people's judgment of others (Veitch and Griffitt, 1976). Specifically, research has shown that the media is one of the public's primary sources of information on social issues (Baker, 1986) and that the public's perception about the importance of a social issue is correlated with its news coverage (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Neuman, 1990). Therefore, journalists, whether they intend it or not, have an impact on the public's attitude toward social issues. Precisely, newspapers are held responsible for the public's feelings of helplessness and compassion fatigue – that is, audiences have become unsensitive after consistently hearing about human suffering with no signs of possible solutions (Hoijer, 2004). And these feelings are an obstacle to action: "the more negatively people feel after consuming bad news, the less likely they are to voice an opinion, or take action to improve the world around them" (Baden, 2015).

Media's need for renewal – both to save newspapers' declining revenue and for the public interest – is the driver behind a new branch of journalism: solutions journalism. Solutions journalism, or constructive journalism, is a style of reporting that includes both coverage of a world issue, and of a credible response to said issue (Benesch, 1998). In recent years, the movement has received a lot of interest, with major media publications dedicating columns to solution-focused stories as those articles appear to generate more engagement than on average (Oliver, 2016). However, solutions journalism still represents a very small proportion of news stories, and still has to convince both newspapers and journalists. Indeed, some practitioners argue that people have a preference for bad news and that positive articles are less credible (Gyldensted, 2011).

Research on solutions journalism is minimal, and presents contradictory results: a study showed that solutions journalism increased readers' intent to work toward a solution to a societal problem (Curry and Hammonds, 2014) but was recently contrasted by researchers who found no significant impact on readers' actual charitable behaviour (McIntyre and Sobel, 2017). Solutions journalism was also found to increase audiences' intent to read more articles from the newspaper (Curry and Hammonds, 2014) and to read similar stories (McIntyre and Sobel, 2017). Researchers and journalists are calling for further research to determine solutions journalism's impact on readers' mood, charitable behaviour, and their perception of newspapers (Gyldensted, 2011; McIntyre and Sobel, 2017). This study is conducted to address these concerns by looking at the impact of solutions journalism on readers' emotions, actions toward a solution, and on readers' perception of the news organization that produced the article.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: in the second section, relevant literature in the context of journalism, media, psychology and advertising is discussed to develop hypotheses on solutions journalism's impact. The third section describes the

experimental design and procedure. In the fourth section, results of an analysis of the experiment's data are presented and discussed. Finally, the fifth section concludes the paper.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Solutions journalism: definition and context

Solutions journalism defines a type of reporting which critically and scrupulously investigates examples of people working toward solutions in order to “provide valuable insights about how communities may more effectively tackle serious problems” (Solutions Journalism Network). Solutions journalism still covers societal problems, but switches the focus to the initiatives acting to solve those problems. Many solution-focused articles also include a “call-to-action” at the end of the article – that is, a hyperlink inviting readers to learn more and get involved by redirecting them to the highlighted solution's website (*HuffPost Impact*; Boisvieux, 2016). While solutions journalism has been used by practitioners since the 1990s (Benesch, 1998), this practice has only recently been formalized by institutions such as the French associations *Reporters d'Espoirs*, Sparknews, or the New York-based Solutions Journalism Network, founded by David Borstein, a *New York Times* author. Solutions journalism is increasingly being adopted by major newspapers, which dedicate entire columns to solution-focused stories (see the *HuffPost*'s *Impact*, *The New York Times*' *Fixes* or *The Guardian*'s *Half Full* sections) and is being incorporated in journalism schools' curriculum (Their, 2016). David Borstein cites three trends that explain the rise of solutions journalism: the proliferation of social entrepreneurs and other organizations alleviating social ills; the explosion of online information that provides alternatives to the mainstream media's negative news; and journalists' desire to cover positive social change (Dyer, 2015).

Solutions journalism comes back to the fundamental question of journalists' responsibility toward society. Indeed, some practitioners criticize reporting solutions as a biased form of investigation breaking journalism rules of neutrality, and argue that journalists' only purpose is to inform citizens and not mobilize them. On the other side, solutions journalists point to research on the media's bias toward bad news and its evident negative impact on the public (Gyldensted, 2011; Patterson, 1996; Robinson and Sheehan, 1983); and argue that journalists have an inevitable influence on individuals. Solutions journalism practitioners recognize this responsibility and aim at correcting their impact on the public, in the hope of motivating citizens to “see the glass half-full” and take actions to solve societal problems.

However, empirical evidence of solutions journalism's impact is still negligible and only a very limited number of studies has been published on the topic (Curry and Hammonds, 2014; Gyldensted, 2011; McIntyre and Sobel, 2015). More work needs to be done to further understand its effect on the public. The following sections use findings from different literatures and empirical evidence to hypothesize its influence on mood, engagement, and newspapers' appreciation. These hypotheses are then tested in an experiment.

### 2.2. Story frame and effect on mood

Multiple studies in psychology have shown that affective reactions can be automatically triggered by a stimulus (Fazio, 1986). More specifically, in the context of news, Veitch and Griffit (1976) found that positive or negative affect was induced by hearing broadcasts containing good or bad news. However, solutions journalism articles include both information about an issue (negative) and a solution aiming at solving the problem (positive), making its impact on affect unclear. Researchers are therefore interested in determining if solutions journalism induces more positive affect generally. Curry and Hammonds (2014) showed that

people reported feeling inspired and/or more optimistic after reading a solution-focused article. Gyldensted (2011) found that positively framed articles increased positive affect and decreased negative affect. Recently, McIntyre and Sobel (2017) found similar results with a solution-focused article.

*H1: Individuals who read a solution-focused news story show more positive affect than readers of a traditional news story.*

So far, studies on solutions journalism have been focused on its impact on positive and negative affect. However, psychology research has showed evidence that valence is not the only characteristic of mood and that arousal, or activation, shapes individuals' state of mind and can be induced by content too (Mehrabian and Russel, 1974; Shapiro, McInnis and Park, 2002). Studies have also found that arousal has an impact on individuals' attention and desire to act (Heilman, 1997; Gaertner and Dovidio, 1977). While it is easy to predict that traditional articles on social problems can induce low arousal (sadness) or high arousal (anger) states, it is unclear which degree of arousal is induced by solutions journalism. Solution-focused articles, indeed, could either excite participants by inspiring them and showing them a path for action (high arousal), or calm them down by assuring existing solutions are currently solving world issues (low arousal). A possible common mood induced by solution-focused articles might be awe. Awe involves feelings of enlightenment, and can be triggered by witnessing exceptional abilities, incredible virtues, a scientific discovery, or beautiful landscapes so vast that the mind has difficulties to process (Keltner and Haidt, 2003). Awe has been defined as a high arousal state (Berger and Milkman, 2012), hence solutions journalism might induce high arousal.

*RQ1: How do solution-focused news stories impact readers' arousal?*

### *2.3. Readers' intent to take action*

Journalists have historically reported social problems in the hope that it would lead citizens to learn about those issues and want to help through donations or citizen engagement; or put pressure on politicians, which would result in governmental action (McPherson, 2012). Human rights advocates have for a long time supported the media as a key asset to lessen the number of social abuses by exposing and shaming criminals (Androff, 2010).

However, research has found the negative bias in news to lead to the public's numbness toward those issues. This reaction can be explained by Seligman's work (1975) on learned helplessness, a process whereby individuals that have repeatedly experienced a negative situation without control are later incapable to improve their situation when they have the means to do so. Indeed, a study reported that helplessness was displayed in 71.4% of the time in news (Levine, 1986). Compassion fatigue is another given explanation of audiences' inaction; it posits that the more suffering individuals see, the more accustomed they become to it, and the less likely they are to empathize and act (Borer, 2012). In the context of media, research has identified bad news repetitiveness, lack of context and of information on solutions to be responsible for the audiences' lack of interest, emotional arousal and intent to contribute to the issue (Kinnick, Krugman and Cameron, 1996).

Given those insights, research provides evidence to argue that solutions journalism, by nature, should have a positive impact on readers' intent to contribute, lessening their inhibition. First, researchers showed that having information about others' charitable behaviour positively influences our own charitable behaviour (Martin and Randal, 2007; Frey and Meier, 2004; Heldt, 2005). Since solution-focused articles showcase individuals acting for a cause, we can assume readers' charitable behaviour would be positively impacted.

Secondly, studies have found that people in a positive mood were more likely to take actions towards long-term, self-improvement goals, even if such actions involved sacrificing

immediate mood. Contrarily, people in a negative mood avoided long-term goals. (Aspinwall, 1998; Raghunathan & Trope, 2002). Fishbach and Labroo (2007) further showed that when happy people were faced with an accessible self-improvement goal, they were more likely to engage in a self-control action, such as charity donation, than unhappy people. As solutions journalism supposedly induces positive affect and presents information about an action leading to self-improvement goals, these studies provide arguments toward a positive impact on readers' intent to act.

Thirdly, the advertising literature provides evidence that positive mood leads to higher attitude toward the ad and purchase intent (Yi, 1990) than negative mood. In Yi's study (1990), participants were 24% more likely to purchase a product if its ad was seen after reading a positive news story than a negative one. Commercials embedded within the context of a happy program have been shown to also be rated as more effective than when embedded in a sad program (Goldberg and Gorn, 1987). Since the information about a solution and the call-to-action included in a solution-focused article are intended to trigger an action from the reader (e.g. clicking on the link, donating money), this part of the article could be seen as advertising, or at least, as triggering the same psychological reactions than those induced by advertising. Hence these findings could be transferred to solutions journalism.

Sparknews is the team behind the Impact Journalism Day, a full day during which multiple newspapers across the world publish solutions journalism articles. It has started measuring the impact of these articles on the highlighted solutions: in 2016, three out of four project holders reported that the initiative had a positive impact on their project, with 56% reporting contact from interested readers following the day (Sparknews, 2016). However, only two scientific studies have looked precisely at the impact of solutions journalism on readers' intent to contribute. In a quasi-experimental study, Curry and Hammonds (2014) showed that people were more likely to report a willingness to contribute to the project/cause after reading a solutions journalism piece compared to a traditional one. Contrarily, McIntyre and Sobel (2017) found no significant effect of solutions journalism on readers' actual donations. However, the solution-focused article used in that study did not include mobilizing information, which some journalists argue should be included in a solutions journalism story (Boisvieux, 2016). Mobilizing information is defined as "information which allows people to act on those attitudes which they might already have" (Lemert, Mitzman, Seither, Cook and Hackett, 1977). In a study by Maier (2015), stories that offered mobilizing information to end the issue received more than twice as many comments as stories without a call-to-action. Indeed, mobilizing information could counter the helplessness driven by the media by explaining how readers can individually contribute to solving the issue (Kinnick, Krugman and Cameron, 1996). Therefore, a solution-focused article including mobilizing information should enhance readers' intention to act.

*H2: Individuals who read a solution-focused news story are more willing to engage in behaviour that work toward a solution than those who read a traditional news story.*

One of the most important metrics of an article's success is its number of shares by emails, or on social media. This number indeed influences how newspapers organize their websites (e.g. *The New York Times*' "Most Emailed list"), suggest content to their subscribers and focus their topic coverage. In a quantitative study of the *New York Times*' most emailed articles, researchers found that positive content was more likely to be shared than negative or neutral content (Berger and Milkman, 2012). This result is supported by previous research showing that people are more likely to share positive rather than negative content in order to enhance their self-presentation (Berger and Heath, 2007; Wojnicki and Godes, 2008). Even more impactful, containing high-arousal content, such as awe, in an article was a four times stronger predictor of making it to the most emailed list than presence on the website's home page (Berger and Milkman, 2012). Arianna Huffington and Jessica Prois, executive editor of



the solution-focused sections of the *Huffpost*, have said that readers of a Good News story are twice as likely to share or comment as an average article (Oliver, 2016). In a quasi-experimental study of solutions journalism, readers of a solution-focused article were more likely to say they would talk to friends about the issue and share the article on social media (Curry and Hammonds, 2014). Contrarily, a recent study showed no significant difference in readers' intent to share between solution-focused, shocking, and regular stories (McIntyre and Sobel, 2017).

*H3: Readers of a solution-focused news story are more likely to share it than readers of a traditional news story.*

#### 2.4. News appreciation

Along with sharing intent, information on audiences' demand for constructive news is needed to strengthen the business argument for solutions journalism. One way to measure their appreciation is to study their intent to read more similar stories after reading one solution-focused article. Mood-management theory posits the assumption that we all seek to attain and maintain positive mood (Biswas, Riffe and Zillmann, 1994). Therefore, this theory predicts that individuals in a bad mood will seek exposure to good news, and that individuals in a good mood will avoid exposure to bad news in order to maintain their positive mood. One single study, on news stories styles, showed that readers of a solution-focused article reported a higher willingness to read similar stories than readers of a regular or shocking story (McIntyre and Sobel, 2017). However, in this study participants only self-reported their willingness to read similar stories; their actual behaviour was not measured.

Contrarily to these findings, researchers built a theoretical model using evolutionary logic which explains that people would rather read bad rather than good news (McCluskey, Swinnen and Vandermoortele, 2015). Furthermore, studies found that, when presented with a selection of news stories, people spent more time looking at negative content than neutral or positive content (Trussler and Soroka, 2014). As solutions journalism differs from strictly "good news" in that it not only highlights positive initiatives but also cover world issues, it is unclear whether these findings apply to solution-focused articles too. Moreover, readers' preference for either positively or negatively framed news might be different once they have read a first article.

*H4: Individuals that read a solution-focused article are more likely to prefer reading a similar article than readers of a traditional article.*

#### 2.5. Attitude toward the newspaper

What is still missing in research on solutions journalism is its impact on newspapers. Indeed, many editors are still skeptical about the public's reaction to this reporting style and how it might impact the newspaper's brand. Advertising studies have repeatedly shown that when people process an ad in a positive mood rather than neutral, they experience higher brand attitudes (Batra and Stayman, 1990; Srull, 1983; Yi, 1990). De Pelsmacker, Geuens and Anckaert (2002) showed that a good feeling induced by a context is transferred (or misattributed) to the attitude toward the ad, and in turn attitude toward the brand. If we assume a newspaper's article acts as a brand's ad, and since solutions journalism seems to induce a positive mood, we can assume it will increase readers' attitude toward the newspaper's brand.

In the context of newspapers and solutions journalism specifically, a survey on citizens' expectations of news in the United States (Heider et al., 2005) found that 51% of individuals rated "offering solutions to problems" as an extremely important characteristic of news. More recently, Curry and Hammonds (2014) showed that people that read a solutions journalism

article were more likely to say they would read more articles from the newspaper in which the article appeared. They were also more likely to say that they felt better informed and knowledgeable about the issue. In turn, perception of high informational value in a message is known to lead to higher perception of the brand (Ducoffe, 1995; Sweetser, Ahn, Golan and Hocman, 2016). Hence, the higher perceived informativeness of solutions journalism should lead to a higher appreciation. Empirical data also seem to prove people's positive attitude toward newspapers that produce solutions journalism: Nice-Matin, a local French newspaper, has seen a rapid and consequent increase in subscribers, from 2,000 to 6,000 the next year, after deciding to offer a version focused on solutions journalism. Similarly, sales of the "Libé des Solutions" (the solutions journalism version of the French newspaper Libération) are now 22% higher than for a standard edition (Galpin, 2016).

However, these findings are contrasted by DeLung, Magee, DeLauder and Maioreescu (2012) who showed that participants who read a positive article were less likely to read that newspaper again than those who read an article with a neutral or negative frame.

*H5: Individuals who read a solution-focused news story have a higher attitude toward the newspaper's brand than those who read a traditional news story.*

Another key characteristic in evaluating solutions journalism's impact on newspapers is readers' perceived credibility of newspapers (Gaziano and McGrath, 1986). In Gyldensted's study (2011), readers of a constructive journalism article provided qualitative feedback of skepticism toward the newspaper. DeLung et al. (2012) found that a positive frame resulted in greater perception of bias than in articles with either a neutral or negative frame. With solutions journalism inducing positive valence, its content might be perceived as more biased.

In the advertising literature, multiple studies have showed ad skepticism as a negative antecedent of ad perception and attitude toward the ad (Baek and Morimoto, 2012; Obermiller and Spangenberg, 2000). This can be explained by the persuasion knowledge model (PKM), which predicts that recognizing a message's intent to persuade leads to psychological reactance, and therefore negative responses to the message (Friestad and Wright, 1994; Sweetser et al., 2016). Since solutions journalism highlights a specific organization that acts as a solution, readers might be skeptical of its intent, or integrity, and therefore credits the newspaper as less credible.

*H6: Individuals who read a solutions journalism story perceive the newspaper as less credible than individuals who read a traditional news story.*

### **3. Method**

#### *3.1. Design*

An experiment was designed to examine the effects of a news story style – solutions journalism. The study was administered as an online questionnaire. 160 participants were exposed to one of two versions of a questionnaire, either containing a traditional article (n=79) or a solution-focused article (n=81).

#### *3.2. Participants*

Participants were recruited on Amazon's Mechanical Turk, a crowdsourcing marketplace which enables individuals or businesses to recruit workers for small tasks. Scholars have shown that the population of Mechanical Turk workers is significantly more representative than the ones used in many typical psychological studies (Berinsky, Huber and Lenz, 2012; Buhrmester, Kwang and Gosling, 2011). Furthermore, it allows respondents to participate in their natural environment, leading to more honest answers and reactions. Data were discarded for individuals who experienced technical problems or spent less than one minute to complete the survey. The remaining sample used for analysis consisted of 146

participants. Of these, 83 (57%) were male and 63 (43%) female. The majority of respondents was between 18 and 35 years-old ( $n=102$ , 70%) and had obtained a Bachelor's degree ( $n=73$ , 50%). All participants were based in the United States.

### 3.3. Stimulus materials

A fictitious online newspaper's web-page was designed for this experiment. The newspaper was named The Reporter and the stimulus replicated a traditional online newspaper's interface. The fictitious web-page contained an article, including a headline, date, photo, story text, short author biography and call-to-action. To adhere to the Solutions Journalism Network's guidelines (Bansal and Martin, 2015), the article was an adapted version of a news story written by their co-founder David Bornstein and published in *The New York Times* (Bornstein, 2013). The article was used in previous studies (Curry and Hammonds, 2014) and covers the negative impact of schools on children that have faced traumatic experiences.

### 3.4. Procedure

Participants voluntarily participated in the study and were redirected to a Qualtrics survey. After being asked for their consent to participate, they were asked to read the following article thoroughly and in the same way they would usually read online content. They were then presented with the stimulus and answered several questions including demographic questions. Finally, participants were given a code to enter into the Amazon's website to receive their payment. Participants took an average of 5.39 minutes ( $SD=3.35$ ) to read the stimulus and answer the questionnaire.

### 3.5. Independent variables

The news story's reporting style was manipulated to be either traditional or solutions journalism. The headline differed in each version but remained of similar length (8 words). In both articles, the core of the article remained the same, but the solution-focused version included information about a potential solution: it explained the action of an initiative and its positive impact on the kids. To build on McIntyre and Sobel (2017)'s recommendations for future research, the solution-focused version also included mobilizing information: that is, on how readers could contribute to the project. As participants were probably limited in their budget (they were paid \$0.50 to complete the survey), they were told about an action to get engaged at no cost for them. Both versions included a call-to-action at the end of the article, inviting them to learn more and get involved by clicking on a link. This call-to-action used the same format than stories in the Impact section of the *HuffPost*. It was later used to test for intent to contribute to the cause.

### 3.6. Dependent variables

*Affect and Activation.* Positive and negative affect, as well as high and low arousal, were measured using Russell's (1980) circumplex model. Participants were asked to rate on a five-point scale the extent to which they experienced various emotions at the present moment. The circumplex model is designed as a two-axes model to represent emotional states both in terms of valence (negative – positive) and arousal (low – high). Eight words, including “sad” and “nervous” represented negative affect. Eight words, including “happy” and “contented”, represented positive affect. Similarly, eight words, including “depressed” and “calm” represented low arousal while eight words, including “excited” and “upset” represented high arousal.

*Behavioral intentions:* click, share, support and read more. Intent to click on the call-to-action, to support the cause and to share the story were measured to determine participant's engagement with the story topic, following Oliver, Hartmann and Woolley (2012).



Participants were asked to rate on a seven-point Likert-type scale the likelihood that they would engage in the described behaviour.

To measure their intent to read similar stories, participants were told to imagine they were presented with two articles suggestions. The screen showed two headlines, one suggesting a solutions journalism article, and the other a traditional article. They were asked to choose the one they would be more likely to click on, following Trussler and Soroka (2014). This intended to simulate real conditions, as online news websites often suggest other articles after one news story.

*Appreciation of the newspaper.* Appreciation of the newspaper was determined as the attitude toward the newspaper’s brand and was assessed by using four seven-point bipolar scales anchored by the adjectives “favorable-unfavorable”, “good-bad”, “like-dislike” and “pleasant-unpleasant” (Graeff, 1996; Sirgy, 1985).

*Credibility.* Newspaper’s credibility was measured by asking participants to rate on a five-point scale the extent to which they agreed to several statements about the newspaper. The statements followed Gaziano and McGrath’s 12-item news credibility (1986) which includes trustworthiness, bias, accuracy and community relations (Armstrong and Collins, 2009).

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1. Data analysis and results

Table 1 – Cell Means for Dependent Variables

	Traditional		Solutions	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Positive affect*	<b>2.41</b>	0.82	<b>2.76</b>	0.92
Negative affect	<b>1.83</b>	0.74	<b>1.67</b>	0.61
High arousal	<b>2.09</b>	0.58	<b>2.15</b>	0.59
Low arousal	<b>2.15</b>	0.55	<b>2.28</b>	0.48
Intent to click on link	<b>3.62</b>	1.90	<b>3.94</b>	2.05
Intent to support the cause	<b>3.70</b>	1.69	<b>3.79</b>	1.94
Intent to share	<b>3.53</b>	1.93	<b>3.86</b>	1.86
Preference for similar story*	<b>1.23</b>	0.42	<b>1.76</b>	0.43
Attitude toward the newspaper*	<b>5.09</b>	1.10	<b>5.64</b>	1.04
Credibility of the newspaper	<b>46.24</b>	7.51	<b>47.42</b>	8.11

\* statistically significant difference

*Manipulation Check.* To ensure that participants noticed the different news styles, a manipulation check was included. Participants were asked if the article they just read contained information about a solution that might help solve the problem. This method was previously used in studies on solutions journalism and advertising (Sweetser et al., 2016; McIntyre and Sobel, 2017; Gyldensted, 2011). A one-way ANOVA revealed that the manipulation was effective: participants who read the solutions story were more likely to say that the article contained information about a solution,  $F(1,144) = 64.79, p < 0.001$ .

*Affect and Activation.* H1 predicted that individuals who read a solution-focused story would report more positive affect than those who read a traditional news story. Because the circumplex model is designed to be used as a multidirectional scale, the eight items intended to measure positive valence and the eight items intended to measure negative valence were

averaged to create two composite variables ( $\alpha=0.80$ ,  $\alpha=0.80$ ). A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect of the type of news story on positive affect,  $F(1, 144) = 5.76$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . Participants who read the solutions journalism piece felt significantly more positive affect ( $M = 2.76$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ) than those who read the traditional piece ( $M = 2.41$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ).

While participants who read the solutions journalism piece felt less negative affect ( $M = 1.67$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ) than those who read the traditional one ( $M = 1.83$ ,  $SD = 0.74$ ), a one-way ANOVA showed no significant difference in negative affect on readers,  $F(1, 144) = 1.89$ ,  $p = 0.17$ . H1 was partially supported: readers of the solution-focused piece reported significantly more positive affect.

RQ1 asked how the style of news story might impact readers' arousal. Using Russell's circumplex model, the eight items intended to measure high arousal and the eight items intended to measure low arousal were averaged to create two composite variables ( $\alpha=0.70$ ,  $\alpha=0.46$ ). A one-way ANOVA showed no significant difference in high arousal between readers of solutions journalism ( $M = 2.15$ ,  $SD = 0.59$ ) and traditional journalism ( $M = 2.15$ ,  $SD = 0.55$ ),  $F(1, 144) = 0.38$ ,  $p = 0.54$ .

A one-way ANOVA also showed no significant difference in low arousal between readers of the solutions journalism article ( $M = 2.28$ ,  $SD = 0.48$ ) and those who read the traditional piece ( $M = 2.15$ ,  $SD = 0.55$ ),  $F(1, 144) = 2.33$ ,  $p = 0.13$ .

*Behavioural intentions.* H2 predicted that individuals who read a solution-focused story would be more likely to support the cause. To measure this intent, two different variables were used, one measuring their intent to click on a link embedded in the article inviting them to "learn more and get engaged" and one measuring their reported intent to support the cause (in a more general way). The two variables were kept separately as the practical aspect of the first one could have an impact on the result. The first variable was only counted for the respondents that indicated having seen the link ( $n=133$ ). While participants who read the solutions journalism piece indicated being more likely to click on the link ( $M = 3.94$ ,  $SD = 2.05$ ) than those who read the regular piece ( $M = 3.62$ ,  $SD = 1.90$ ), a one-way ANOVA showed no significant difference in intent to click,  $F(1, 131) = 0.90$ ,  $p = 0.35$ . Similarly, participants in the solutions condition reported being more likely to support the cause ( $M = 3.79$ ,  $SD = 1.94$ ) than those in the traditional condition ( $M = 3.70$ ,  $SD = 1.94$ ) but a one-way ANOVA showed no significant difference in intent to support the cause,  $F(1, 144) = 0.09$ ,  $p = 0.77$ . H2 was not supported, solutions journalism readers were not significantly more likely to support the cause.

H3 postulated that readers of a solution-focused news story would be more likely to share it than those who read a traditional news story. Participants who read the solutions journalism piece were more likely to share the story around them ( $M = 3.86$ ,  $SD = 1.86$ ) than those who read the traditional piece ( $M = 3.53$ ,  $SD = 1.93$ ). However, a one-way ANOVA showed no significant difference in intent to share,  $F(1, 144) = 1.13$ ,  $p = 0.29$ . H3 was not supported, solutions journalism readers were not significantly more likely to share the article.

H4 predicted that readers of a solutions journalism piece would have a stronger preference for similar stories than readers of a traditional piece. A Chi-square test of independence revealed a significant interaction ( $\chi^2(1) = 42$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Readers of a solution-focused news story showed a greater preference for reading a similar story ( $n=55$ , 76%) than readers of a traditional news story ( $n=17$ , 23%). H4 was supported, solutions journalism readers showed a significantly stronger preference for similar stories.

*Appreciation of the newspaper.* H5 posited that readers of a solution-focused article would have a higher appreciation of the newspaper than readers of a traditional article. The four bipolar scales were averaged to create one composite variable ( $\alpha=0.75$ ). A one-way ANOVA revealed that readers of a solution-focused news story reported a higher appreciation

of the newspaper's brand ( $M = 5.64$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ) than readers of a traditional news story ( $M = 5.09$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ),  $F(1, 144) = 9.59$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . H5 was supported, solutions journalism readers reported a higher appreciation of the newspaper.

*Credibility of the newspaper.* H6 postulated that individuals who read a solution-focused article would rate the newspaper as less credible than individuals who read a regular article. The twelve statements were summed up to create one credibility variable ranging from 12 to 60 ( $\alpha=0.92$ ). Contrary to the hypothesis, data revealed a higher perceived credibility for solutions journalism readers ( $M = 47.42$ ,  $SD = 8.11$ ) than for traditional journalism readers ( $M = 46.24$ ,  $SD = 7.51$ ). However, a one-way ANOVA showed no significant difference in credibility across the news story styles,  $F(1, 144) = 0.82$ ,  $p = 0.37$ . H6 was not supported, solutions journalism readers did not rate the newspaper as less credible than traditional journalism readers.

Table 2 – ANOVA Results for Dependent Variables

Type of news story (traditional, solutions)	M(SD)	F	df1	df2	MSE
Positive affect	2.58(0.87)	5.76*	1	144	108.43
Negative affect	1.75(0.67)	1.89	1	144	66.04
High arousal	2.12(0.58)	0.38	1	144	49.25
Low arousal	2.22(0.52)	2.33	1	144	38.66
Intent to click on link	3.78(1.98)	0.90	1	131	515.15
Intent to support the cause	3.75(1.81)	0.09	1	144	475.33
Intent to share	3.69(1.89)	1.13	1	144	517.06
Attitude toward the newspaper	5.37(1.07)	9.59*	1	144	166.43
Credibility of the newspaper	46.83(7.81)	0.82	1	144	8791.12

\* =  $p < 0.05$

#### 4.2. Discussion, Managerial Implications and Suggestions for Further Research

Results of this analysis are encouraging for solutions journalism: solutions journalism readers' positive affect, intent to read similar stories and appreciation of the newspaper were higher than for traditional journalism readers. Those are all arguments toward solutions journalism's relevance as a new form of journalism with a positive impact on both audiences, social problems and newspapers.

Solution-focused articles appear to increase readers' positive affect. This confirms previous findings (Gyldenbergh, 2011; McIntyre and Sobel, 2017) and could be explained by the positive frame that information on a solution to the problem induces. Solutions journalism could therefore be the solution to continue informing citizens about societal problems without impacting their level of anxiety, negativity or stress, and, instead, form a positive, optimistic attitude.

The impact of news styles on arousal was more unclear. Indeed, solution-focused articles seemed to increase both high-arousal and low-arousal emotions compared to traditional articles. Solutions journalism's impact on low-arousal seemed to be more significant, however. Perhaps, knowledge that an initiative is currently working toward solving the problem acts as a tranquiliser and calms the high-arousal moods (e.g. anger) traditional news about social problems triggers. Future research should try different arousal measuring techniques, such as those used by Mehrabian and Russel (1974) and Shapiro et al. (2002). Future attention should be given to feelings of awe induced by solution-focused

articles. Indeed, awe is characterized as a high-arousal state (Berger and Milkman, 2012) and was expected to be triggered by information on great virtues and societal problem-solving. Arousal is a very important indicator in the context of solutions journalism as it is a state of mobilization, and has been shown to “increase action-related behaviors, such as getting up to help others” (Gaertner and Dovidio, 1977) but also to generate greater ad acceptance (Newell, Henderson and Wu, 2011; Aylesworth and MacKenzie, 1998). Furthermore, valence and arousal have been shown to impact information processing and recall (Isen, 1984; DeLung et al., 2012), with highly emotional and positive mood states helping individuals to better identify important information. Future research should investigate the impact of news style on recall.

Solutions journalism did not significantly impact readers’ intent to take action toward the cause or share the story. This is perhaps a demonstration of the helplessness and compassion fatigue feelings described earlier. Mobilizing information has not allowed for a significant difference between news styles. However, we must note that these behaviours might be influenced by readers’ gender (Leslie, Snyder, Glomb and Kozlowski, 2013), nationality, educational level, or ethnicity: in Heider et al.’s survey (2005) of citizens’ expectations of news, African Americans and Hispanics (M= 68%) were more likely to rate “offering solutions to problems” as an extremely important characteristic of news than Whites and Asian Americans (M=46%). Readers’ charitable behaviour might also be influenced by the story topic and the extent to which it concerns readers. Future research should look at engagement intent across multiple news topics, and further study effects of demographic variables as a recommendation for solutions journalism’s target audience.

Readers of a solution-focused story had a stronger preference for reading similar stories than readers of a traditional article. Interestingly, all participants – whether readers of a solutions or traditional story – showed a distinct preference for the solutions journalism headline (76% of solutions journalism readers and 77% of traditional journalism readers). This contradicts theories that assumed people asked for bad news (McCluskey, Swinnen and Vandermoortele, 2015; Trussler and Soroka, 2014) and supports the findings of multiple surveys (Heider et al., 2005; AFP, 2014) which found a majority of citizens to criticize the media for focusing too much on negative news and ask for positive, solution-oriented news. Perhaps this comes from the fact that solutions journalism differs from strictly positive news (i.e. light-hearted, positive information about an event or a person that does not solve a societal problem). This finding is a key argument for the business benefit of diffusing solution-focused news: readers seem to ask for more of these news stories.

Solutions journalism had a significant effect on readers’ attitude toward the newspaper’s brand. Solutions readers rated the newspaper more positively than readers of a traditional story. This could be attributed to the positive valence induced by the solutions journalism article: in the advertising literature, positively framed ads lead to higher attitude toward the brand (Batra and Stayman, 1990; Srull, 1983; Yi, 1990). This enhanced attitude toward the newspaper confirms surveys revealing the public’s demand for positive news (Heider et al., 2015, AFP, 2014) and shows that people reward newspapers that listen to their needs. Future research could compare the impact of a positive, negative and solution-focused articles on readers’ appreciation of the newspaper to examine the effects strictly induced by valence.

Furthermore, data showed no significant decrease in credibility for newspapers that publish solution-focused articles. While this does not prove that the reporting style has no effect on newspapers’ credibility (a slight increase for the solution-focused story was found), it implies that critics’ fears that positively-framed news is seen as shallow and negatively impacts newspapers’ brands (Gyldensted, 2011) are not founded. However, in this study participants were asked to rate the newspaper after reading only one article, which might have not been enough for them to evaluate the publication’s credibility. Future research could have participants read multiple articles before evaluating their perception of the newspaper.

To add to the discussion on the business argument of solutions journalism for newspapers, future research should look at its impact on the perception of ads featured next to articles' content. The previously cited advertising literature would predict a higher attitude toward the ad, the advertiser's brand and purchase intent due to the positive mood induced by solution-focused articles (Batra and Stayman, 1990; Srull, 1983). As research has shown that cognitive priming influences individuals' perception of advertised products (Yi, 1990), solutions journalism might even lead readers to associate attributes of "problem-solver", or "sustainable" to brands advertised next to the article.

## 5. Conclusion

This study adds to the existing literature by looking at the effect of solutions journalism on arousal and attitude toward the newspaper. It confirms minimal research on its effect on affect, charitable behaviour intent; and tests readers' actual preference for similar stories. This experiment found solutions journalism to significantly enhance readers' positive affect, preference for similar stories and attitude toward the publishing newspaper. These findings, despite their small size effects, support that journalists can impact audiences' mood depending on their reporting style, and that a focus on solutions can at least improve readers' affect. These findings also provide business arguments for newspapers to adopt solutions journalism: these stories appear to be more demanded by readers and to improve the newspaper's brand with no significant negative impact on its credibility. Further research is necessary to understand the mechanisms behind solutions journalism's effects, and study its impact on readers, advertisers, newspapers, and journalists.

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