The year journalism was changed

2013 was the year that a new practice began to emerge in journalism. News organizations started coming around to the idea that reporting focused predominately on society’s problems, while important, doesn’t tell the whole story. They saw that solutions journalism — credible and rigorous reporting about serious responses to social issues — better reflected reality, was more likely to engage audiences, and could catalyze more productive public discourse.

The Solutions Journalism Network, formally launched in February, 2013, pulled together the news community to lead this change. SJN is building the appetite and muscle in newsrooms for a different sort of journalism — one that regularly surfaces and critically examines innovations in education, health care, environmental sustainability, and other urgent challenges. When journalists examine problems and adaptive responses on a regular basis, they provide deeper insights into the mechanisms by which a participatory democracy can self-correct. The result is news that provides a more comprehensive, engaging and faithful view of world.

In 2013, SJN laid the strategic and operational groundwork for broad and sustainable impact. We forged important partnerships with news organizations such as the Seattle Times and the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting that are putting solutions journalism into practice, providing key proof points for other journalists. We also created the core of a curriculum that will drive learning for increasing numbers of reporters, editors, producers, and journalism students. We initiated many conversations with a wide range of field experts and thought leaders who are crucial to drive adoption. Not least, we built the legal and financial foundation for a first-class organization.

The results are beginning to appear. More and more newsrooms are asking us to work with their staffs, and survey responses indicate that our trainings are catalyzing enthusiastic buy-in. Journalists in those organizations are producing small but growing streams of high-quality stories. And anecdotally, we see that audiences are responding with an energy that indicates greater interest and investment.

This is, we expect, just the start of a shift in journalism that promises (as our t-shirts say) less tunnel and more light: the whole story.

The strategy

SJN has developed a two-stage strategy that defines and prioritizes our programmatic activities for the next two years, laying the foundation for system-change impact. By the end of 2014, we aim to:

- Implement several high-leverage newsroom demonstration projects that prove the case for solutions journalism
- Codify solutions journalism in formal curricula and training programs
- Establish a committed community of practitioners across the field
- Build the foundation for pattern change among leaders and influencers in the field of journalism

These activities will form the platform for a global network of learning and practice change that SJN will create beginning in 2015.
Newsroom partnerships: The Seattle Times
In July, SJN and The Seattle Times launched “Education Lab,” an 18-month long partnership to introduce the solutions approach to the Times’ coverage of public education. This initiative, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, represents a significant opportunity for SJN to explore how to work with editors and journalists to institute solutions journalism in a major, highly credible newsroom – and to assess the impact of the resulting work.

The Times is dedicating three full-time staff and a new, full-time engagement editor to the project. The newspaper will publish at least one major feature and several smaller reports each month, as well video documentaries, guest opinion pieces, Q&As, and a dedicated blog. The Times also is producing a series of live and online conversations connecting the paper’s journalism directly to productive public discourse.

In 2014...
On January 14, SJN announced funding by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the California HealthCare Foundation for a major new partnership focused on the use of health data to inform solutions reporting. SJN will partner with the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation to create a “concierge” function that makes health data highly accessible and useful to journalists. Together, IHME and SJN will focus on “positive deviant” data indicating health outcomes that are better than expected – and that are ripe for investigation and rich material for stories. We will collaborate with at least eight newsrooms, training and mentoring reporters in the application of solutions journalism and providing financial support for high-impact stories catalyzed by the data.

SJN is engaged in discussions with 10 top editors at national news organizations who have indicated a strong willingness to work with us. These include, among others, the Center for Investigative Reporting, National Public Radio, and McClatchy Newspapers. SJN is likewise discussing potential partnerships with 25 editors in local and regional newsrooms, and is in a preliminary stage of developing relationships with 10 global news organizations. Our conclusion: the potential to collaborate with the most influential newsrooms on high-impact major projects is greater than we expected – and is limited only by our capacity.

Story funds: Climate change, social & emotional learning, and economic equity
SJN launched three story funds in 2013 focused on climate change resilience (supported by the Rockefeller Foundation); social and emotional learning (with support from NoVo Foundation); and women’s economic equity (also NoVo). In addition, SJN has partnered with the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting to host a fund for global health stories.

From these, we have so far funded 14 reporting projects that will yield a stream of major stories over the next year. For each funded project, SJN has provided individual mentoring to expose reporters to the solutions approach and to help shape stories that incorporate the solutions lens. To date, three major stories have been published or aired: Wanjohi Kabukuru’s examination of a multi-national response to coral reef degradation in island and coastal nations in the western Indian Ocean rim; Mantoe Phakati’s analysis of a shift by rural women in Swaziland to growing and marketing drought resistant crop seeds; and Ari Daniel Shapiro’s account of coral reefs in Palau that seem to resist ocean acidification.

In 2014...
We will launch a second climate change fund in early 2014, likely focused on resilience efforts in urban areas. We are planning a fifth fund targeting an issue to be determined. In the second quarter of 2014, we plan to evaluate the impact of the story fund model and consider other/additional mechanisms for seeding important solutions-oriented work.
Curriculum development and training
SJN has created curricula for one-hour, two-hour, and full-day journalist trainings, designed to be deployed live or in webinars through accessible lists, models, and interactive exercises.

We have delivered versions of this training to 14 U.S. news organizations. By design, we have done trainings with a diverse range of organizations, cutting across media type, size, and geography – from public radio station news directors to investigative journalists at the Center for Public Integrity to reporters at smaller newspapers like the Cedar Rapids (IA) Gazette.

SJN has begun to build out a suite of online tools, including “issue guides” and 75 model solutions stories, intended to advance the understanding and practice of solutions journalism for reporters and editors who don’t have access to our direct training.

In 2014...
We will complete a downloadable toolkit, available for free to all journalists, in the first quarter. By mid-year, we expect to create (with Marquette University’s Diederich School of Communications and the Poynter Institute) a multi-part online course designed to appeal to professional journalists.

Changing the framework in journalism
Thought Leader Relationships: We have begun building relationships with 20 credible and highly visible journalism and media and technology executives who are aligned with the SJN mission, forming a core-of-the-core network that will advise and help us establish our identity across their networks.

Conference presentations: SJN staff members have made high-impact presentations at 15 media, media funding, social innovation and university conferences.

“Fixes”: The flagship model of solutions journalism continues to be The New York Times “Fixes” column, written largely by SJN co-founders David Bornstein and Tina Rosenberg. The column is among the most popular of the Times’ offerings, making the list of most-emailed articles the majority of the time.

Website: Launched in February 2013, the SJN website is building out offerings that describe, illustrate, teach, discuss and debate solutions journalism – including examples in different media forms, a repository of tools for journalists, and an active blog that highlights, analyzes and critiques journalism from the solutions journalism perspective. Thus far, traffic to the site has grown 32% since June, to just over 4,300 visits in November.

Social media: We have created a robust, consistent presence on both Twitter and Facebook. Since June, we have generated over 600 tweets and attracted 1,223 followers. On Facebook, where we have invested considerable effort recently to build audience, we have 450 likes, up 26% in the last month.

Measurement & evaluation
The Solutions Journalism Network’s emerging metrics strategy is designed to capture impact at three levels:

- **Journalist practice change**: Do reporters and editor understand and embrace solutions journalism? And do they sustain adoption of the approach after an initial exposure?
- **Changed relationship between news organization and audience**: We believe that stories with a solutions component engage readers and viewers in ways that are more powerful, and less polarizing, than stories that dwell mainly on problems. We are testing this hypothesis.
- *Changed relationship between audience and issue:* We understand anecdotally that solutions journalism generates different sorts of conversations that can power higher-quality citizenship. We are attempting to measure this effect systematically.

The Seattle Times partnership is the locus of our most intensive investment in impact metrics, and our work there is informing our approach to evaluation of other programs. In this challenging project, we are aided by a team led by Dana Chinn of USC's Annenberg School of Communications and including experts from *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, and the Center for Investigative Reporting.

**Organizational capacity: Building for sustainability**
In the last six months of 2013, the Solutions Development Network has rapidly expanded organizational capacity to support the sustainable delivery of high-impact programs, thanks to financial backing and advice from the Einhorn Family Charitable Trust, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the William James Foundation.

**Staffing:** SJN’s team has grown to nine, with three recent hires:
- Rikha Rani, who comes to SJN from Genentech and formerly the Clinton Global Initiative will join our team as intelligence director, focusing on curriculum development and metrics.
- Lori Robinson has taken on the part-time role of digital curriculum editor and manager, building out the online toolkit and developing journalism school curricula.
- Taylor Nelson joined us as a full-time development and administration associate.

**1023 application & fiscal sponsorship:** SJN submitted its 1023 application to the IRS in November 2013. We have been advised that the approval process may take as along as 12-24 months from the date of submission. Until we attain independent tax-exempt status, SJN continues to operate under the aegis of a fiscal sponsor, which will be the New Venture Fund effective in 2014.

**Infrastructure and financial capacity:** SJN also held its first meeting of our board of directors, registered with applicable state regulatory bodies, put proper insurance protection in place, and retained a reputable accountant and independent auditor. These last two will advise on the submission of SJN’s first (and provisional) 990 this May.