The Power of Solutions Journalism

Alexander L. Curry and Keith H. Hammonds

SUMMARY

Solutions journalism is reporting about responses to entrenched social problems. It examines instances where people, institutions, and communities are working toward solutions. Solutions-based stories focus not just on what may be working, but how and why it appears to be working, or, alternatively, why it may be stumbling.

In engagements with more than 30 newsrooms and hundreds of reporters, producers, and editors across the U.S., the Solutions Journalism Network has identified growing interest in the practice of solutions journalism. But what happens when we put this form of reporting to the test: How do citizens respond?

This report outlines the results of a quasi-experiment conducted by the Solutions Journalism Network and the Engaging News Project.[1] The findings demonstrate that solutions-based reporting may be an effective journalistic tool that serves the needs of both audiences and news organizations, and that it has the potential to increase reader engagement.

In the study, a sample of 755 U.S. adults was presented with one of six news articles. The articles reported on three different issues: the effects of traumatic experiences on children in American schools, homelessness in urban America, and a lack of clothing among poor people in India. For each issue, highly similar articles were compared: one that focused exclusively on the problem (non-solution version), and one that included identical reporting on the problem, but added reporting about a potential response to mitigate that problem (solution version). The addition of solutions content was the only difference between the two articles.

The results of this test indicate that solutions-based journalism holds promise in at least three areas: heightening audiences' perceived knowledge and sense of efficacy, strengthening the connection between audiences and news organizations, and catalyzing potential engagement on an issue.

Heightening audiences' perceived knowledge and sense of efficacy
The study showed that readers of solutions-based news articles were significantly more likely than non-solutions readers to:

- Say the article seemed different from typical news articles
- Perceive that they gained more knowledge about the issue in the article
- Indicate that they felt better informed about the issue
- Respond that the article had increased their interest in the issue
- Believe they could contribute to a solution to the issue
- Believe that there are effective ways to address the issue
- Say that the article influenced their opinion about the issue
- Indicate that they felt inspired and/or optimistic after reading the article

Strengthening the connection between audiences and news organizations
Solutions readers were more likely than non-solutions readers to indicate that they would:

- Read more articles by the person who authored the article they read
- Read more articles from the newspaper in which their article appeared
- Read more articles about the issue
- Talk to friends or family about the issue
- Share the article they read on social media

Catalyzing potential engagement on an issue
Solutions readers were more likely than non-solutions readers to indicate their desire to:
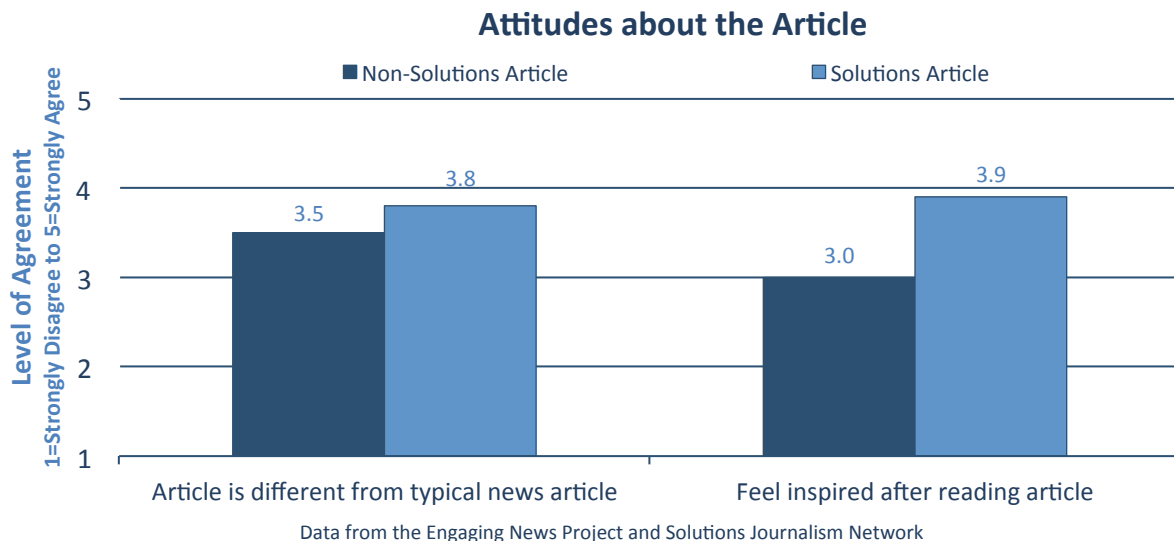
- Get involved in working toward a solution to the issue
- Donate money to an organization working on the issue

All three shifts, we believe, reflect favorably on audience relationships with news and news organizations. People who think they know more about an issue, share a story with a friend, and/or feel more empowered to act are likely to attach greater value to the news and to feel a stronger attachment to the respective news source.[2]

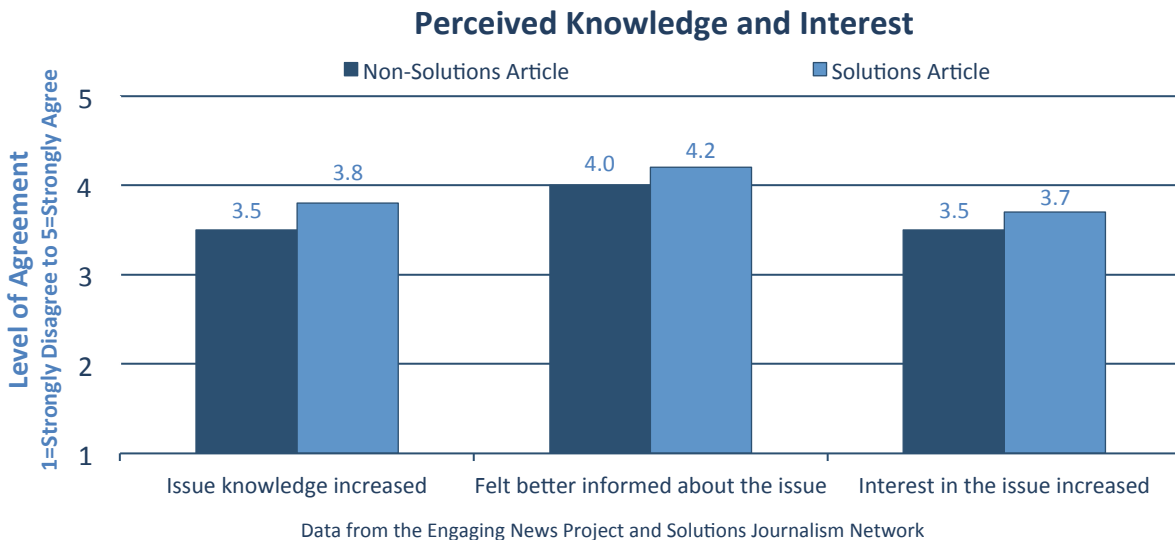## CHANGES IN PERCEIVED KNOWLEDGE AND SENSE OF EFFICACY

Readers of solutions-based stories expressed more agreement than readers of non-solutions stories that the article they read was different than the typical newspaper article.[3] Readers of the solution versions also were more "inspired and/or optimistic after reading the article" than their non-solutions counterparts.[4]

It should be noted that all of the results reported in this study, and displayed in the accompanying charts, indicate statistically significant differences in responses between solutions and non-solutions article readers.   In other words, the chances are extremely slim that the differences in responses are merely based on chance.

Attitudes about the Article

■ Non-Solutions Article   ■ Solutions Article

Level of Agreement
1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree

Article is different from typical news article: Non-Solutions 3.5, Solutions 3.8

Feel inspired after reading article: Non-Solutions 3.0, Solutions 3.9

Data from the Engaging News Project and Solutions Journalism Network

Readers also reported differences in how much they believed they knew about the issue, as well as in how interested in and informed they felt about the issue after reading the article.[5] In both cases, responses were higher for readers of solutions articles compared to non-solutions articles. Specifically, respondents were asked to agree

---

with the following statements: "The article increased my interest in this topic," "I feel better informed about the issue discussed in the article," and "The article did not increase my knowledge of the issue."[6]

Perceived Knowledge and Interest

■ Non-Solutions Article   ■ Solutions Article

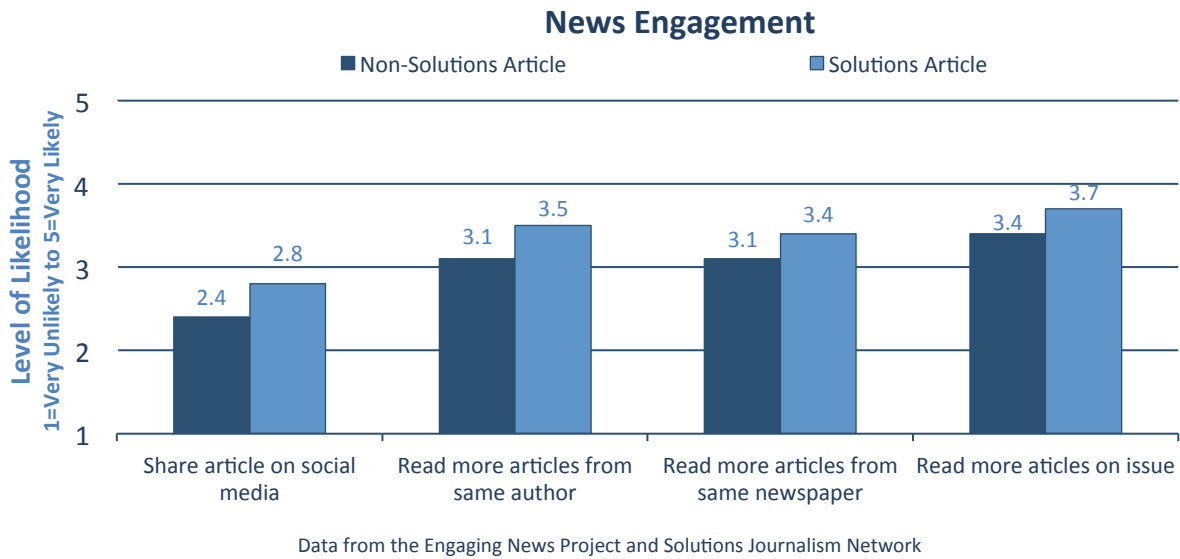Data from the Engaging News Project and Solutions Journalism Network

Survey takers also were asked to indicate how they felt about solutions to the issue, including their own ability to contribute to helping solve the problem they read about in their article.[7] Respondents noted their agreement with the following statements: "Now that I've read this article, I think I can contribute to a solution to this problem;" "Now that I've read this article, I think there are ways to effectively address this problem;" and "The article influenced my opinion about the issue." In all cases, solutions-article readers were more likely to agree with these statements than those who read non-solutions articles.

Agency

■ Non-Solutions Article   ■ Solutions Article

Data from the Engaging News Project and Solutions Journalism Network
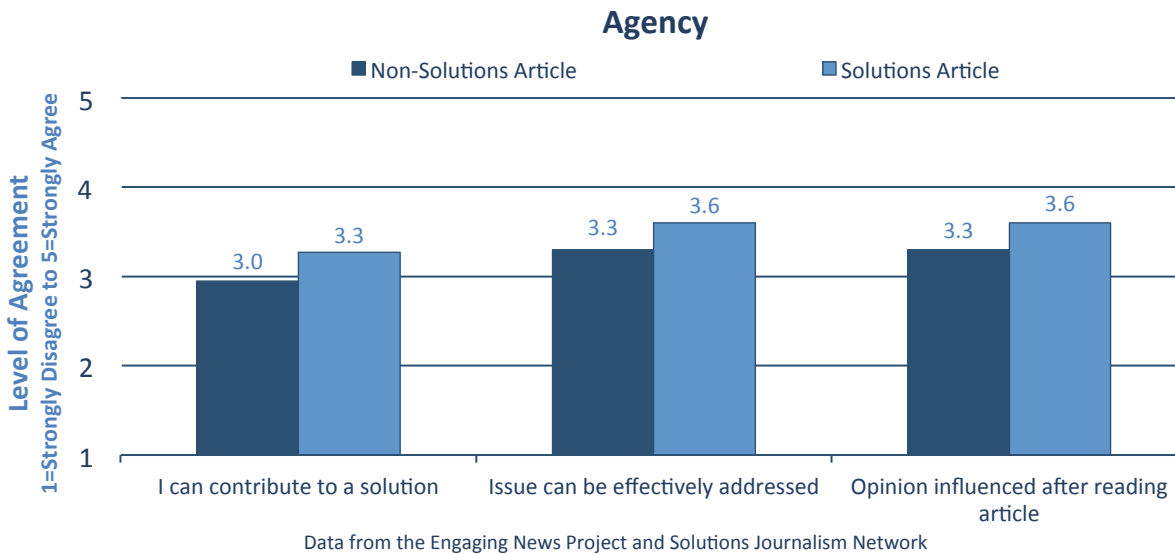
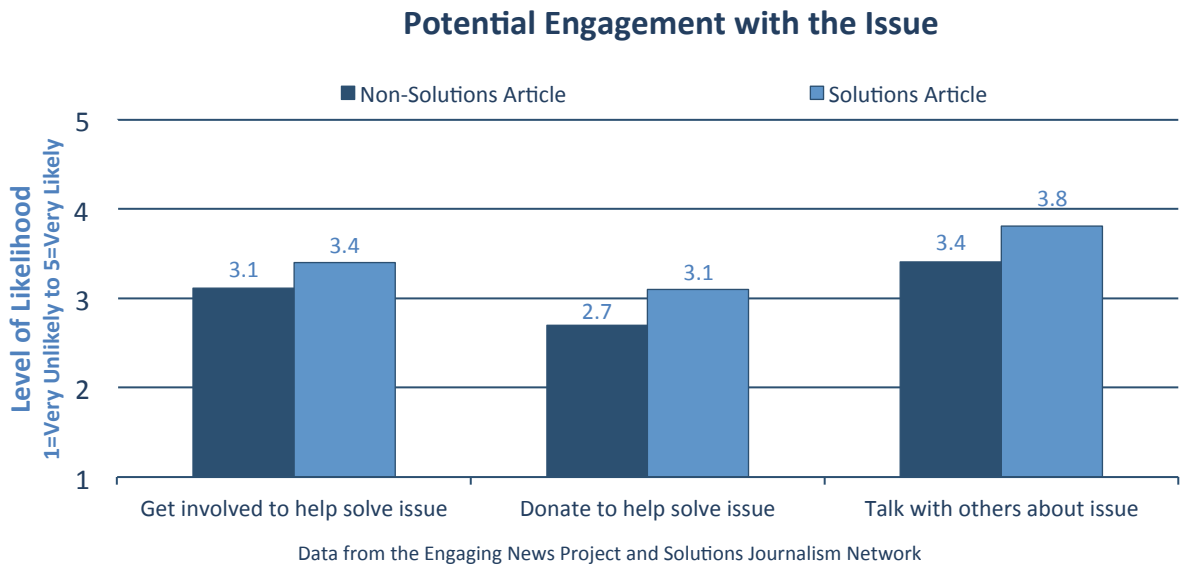## CHANGES IN READERS' CONNECTIONS TO NEWS ORGANIZATIONS

Respondents were asked how likely they were to: share the article on social media, read more articles by the unnamed author of the article they read, read more article in the unnamed newspaper in which the article appeared, and read more articles about the particular issue.[8] In all instances, survey takers who read solutions

articles were significantly more likely to indicate their desire to enact these behaviors than those who read non-solutions articles.

News Engagement

■ Non-Solutions Article ■ Solutions Article

Level of Likelihood
1=Very Unlikely to 5=Very Likely

	Share article on social media	Read more articles from same author	Read more articles from same newspaper	Read more aticles on issue
Non-Solutions Article	2.4	3.1	3.1	3.4
Solutions Article	2.8	3.5	3.4	3.7

Data from the Engaging News Project and Solutions Journalism Network

CHANGES IN CITIZENS' ENGAGEMENT IN SOCIETY

Respondents were asked about their likelihood of getting involved in working toward a solution to the issue, donating to an organization working on the issue, and talking to family and friends about the issue.[9] Again, in all cases, those who read solutions articles indicated higher likelihoods than those who read non-solutions articles.

Potential Engagement with the Issue

■ Non-Solutions Article ■ Solutions Article

Level of Likelihood
1=Very Unlikely to 5=Very Likely

	Get involved to help solve issue	Donate to help solve issue	Talk with others about issue
Non-Solutions Article	3.1	2.7	3.4
Solutions Article	3.4	3.1	3.8

Data from the Engaging News Project and Solutions Journalism Network

This section's title includes a key qualifiying word, *potential*, because this study did not measure actual behavior, but instead assessed behavioral intentions. If readers of solutions articles follow suit on such intentions, society may see a benefit due to increased involvement in, funding for, and overall awareness of the issues that are weighing on communities and that are often the focal point of solutions-based reporting.

Readers also were asked the following yes/no question at the end of the survey: "Would you like to learn more about how to get involved in finding solutions to this issue?" As was the case in all other instances in this study,

readers of solutions-based articles gave significantly more "yes" responses than those reading non-solutions articles.[10]

Desire to Learn More about the Issue
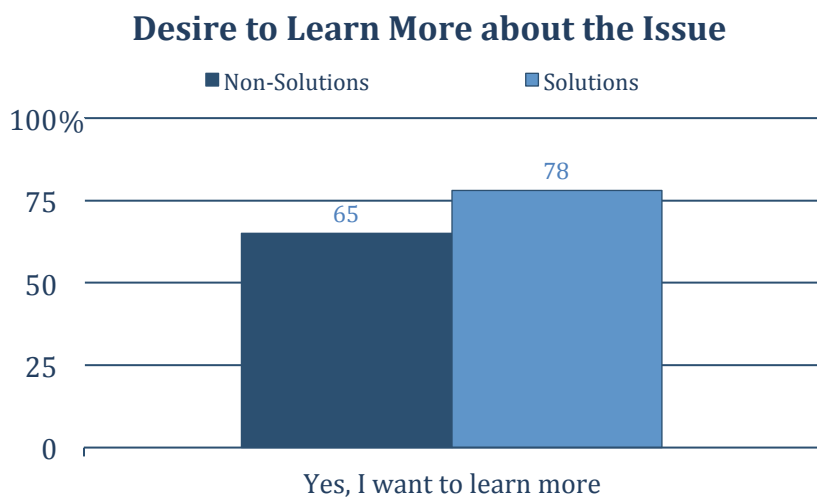
Data from the Engaging News Project and Solutions Journalism Network

CONCLUSION

These study results suggest that solutions journalism could have significant ramifications for readers and news organizations alike, along with the potential to impact society at large. Compared to readers of non-solutions articles, readers of solutions-based articles not only indicate that they feel more informed by reading solutions stories, but that they want to continue to learn about the issue and were inspired to work toward a solution. For news organizations, the benefits lie in the solutions-readers' deeper connection to the issues and desire to continue to engage on them, their increased propensity to share what they read, and their desire to read more articles by the author and from the same newspaper. These benefits to individuals, news organizations and, potentially, society, could make solutions journalism a valuable alternative to traditional problem-focused reporting.

BACKGROUND ON SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM

WHAT IS SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM?

Solutions journalism is critical reporting that investigates and explains credible responses to social problems. It delves into the how-to's of problem solving, often structuring stories as puzzles or mysteries that investigate questions like: What models are having success reducing the high school dropout rate and how do they actually work?

When done well, the stories can provide valuable insights about how communities may better tackle important problems. As such, solutions journalism can be both highly informing and engaging. News organizations such as The Seattle Times, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, and the Deseret News, among others, have deployed solutions reporting in an attempt to create a foundation for productive, forward looking (and less polarizing) community dialogues about vital social issues.

In trying to meet these goals, a solutions journalism story attempts to answer in the affirmative the following ten questions (which serve as a framework, not a set of rules): [11]

1. Does the story explain the causes of a social problem?
2. Does the story present an associated response to that problem?
3. Does the story refer to problem solving and how-to details?
4. Is the problem solving process central to the story's narrative?
5. Does the story present evidence of results linked to the response?
6. Does the story explain the limitations of the response?
7. Does the story contain an insight or teachable lesson?
8. Does the story avoid reading like a puff piece?
9. Does the story draw on sources that have ground-level expertise, not just a 30,000 foot understanding?
10. Does the story give greater attention to the response than to a leader, innovator, or do-gooder?

A good example of solutions journalism will address many, though not necessarily all, of the above questions.

Solutions journalism is a form of explanatory journalism that may serve as a form of watchdog reporting, highlighting effective responses to problems in order to spur reform in areas where people or organizations are failing to respond adequately, particularly when better options are available.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR NEWS ORGANIZATIONS

Many journalists report compellingly on the world's problems, but they regularly fail to highlight and explain responses that demonstrate the potential to ameliorate problems, even when those initiatives show strong evidence of effectiveness.

As a result, people are far more aware of what is wrong with society than what is being done to try to improve it. For many issues that receive ongoing news coverage, what's most absent is not awareness about the problems but awareness about credible efforts to solve those problems. This omission causes many people to feel overwhelmed and to believe that their efforts to engage as citizens may be futile. Research indicates that when journalists regularly raise awareness about problems without showing people what can be done about them, news audiences are more likely to tune out and deny the message or even disengage from public life.[12]

These study results suggest that solutions journalism has the potential to address several major concerns confronting today's newsrooms. These concerns include: (a) readers' perceptions, real or imagined, that news is overwhelmingly negative, (b) readers' feeling that the thoroughness of news reporting is on a downward trend; and (c) the decline in news readership. Each of these concerns, along with solutions journalism's potential to address them, is explored below.

News Negativity. A prevailing mentality among those who attend to the news is the belief that the majority of news is negative.[13] Although some research has noted a few positive aspects of negative news, overall, it is believed that, on balance, it does more harm than good.[14] Negative news is a contributor to news fatigue, or a diminished desire to turn to the news.[15] The pervasive belief is not only that most news is negative, but that it is, in fact, a reporter's job to cover negative news. In addition, negative news has been shown to inhibit subsequent information recall.[16] In other words, readers of negative news stories are less likely to remember what they have read after encountering negative information.

Today, many news organizations try to balance the negativity of news by including periodic feel-good reporting, such as profiles of "heroes" or people "making a difference." This approach reveals an implicit bias held by many journalists: a belief that reporting on efforts to solve social problems is of secondary importance to society – a belief that may not by shared by news audiences.[17] Given the challenge of balancing the tone of coverage,

solutions journalism may offer a more serious-minded approach, providing readers with an entry point to engage more deeply with difficult issues.

News Thoroughness. In 2013, the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism reported that many people had turned away from a news outlet because of a perceived decline in news quality.[18] Specifically, the study asked people if they thought the *quantity* of news was in decline or the *quality* of news was in decline. More than 60% of respondents said that news quality was in decline. It is possible that solutions journalism, by giving people a broader view of the news – namely, reporting on problems *and* responses to those problems – could help to reverse this downward trend.

Readership Decline. Dovetailing with the perception of declining news thoroughness is the finding that those who believe news quality is in decline are also turning away from the news. The same Pew study referenced above asked people the following question: "Have you stopped turning to a particular news outlet because you felt they were no longer providing you with the news and information you were accustomed to?"[19] Sixty-five percent of respondents answered "yes." What this tells us is that if a news outlet is not meeting the needs of the news consumers, these consumers may look elsewhere for their information. Given these study results, we believe that further research is warranted to explore questions about whether solutions journalism has the potential to arrest readership decline – particularly decline associated with news quality – and to drive other changes in audience news consumption, engagement or brand loyalty.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

A survey-based quasi-experimental design was employed to test the effects of solutions journalism. Survey respondents were recruited via the data-collection company, Survey Sampling International, which administered the online survey to a nationwide sample of 1,500 Americans.

Respondents were invited to read "a recent article that appeared in a U.S. newspaper," and told that after reading the article they would be asked several questions. Respondents were encouraged to read the article thoroughly, as they were told that they would not be able to return to the text of the article after they finished reading. The articles were from the Fixes section of the New York Times.

Upon reading the instructions, respondents saw one of six articles. The articles consisted of three topic pairs, where each pair dealt with a different topic. The topics were: (a) the effects of traumatic experiences on children in American schools; (b) homelessness in urban America; and (c) a lack of clothing among poor people in India. Each pair of articles contained a solutions version and a non-solutions version. Other than the presence/absence of solutions content, the articles were identical. The text of each article is located in an appendix at the end of this report.

After reading the article, all respondents were asked to respond to an identical series of survey items. Most of the survey items consisted of 5-point Likert-type scales, where respondents were given a statement and asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). One closed-ended question was asked ("Would you like to learn more about how to get involved in finding solutions to this issue?), as well as one open-ended item (Did this article influence the way you think about this issue? If so, how?)[20]

Respondents then were asked whether or not they believed that the author of the story reported on a solution to each problem. This question was used as a manipulation check, to determine whether or not respondents carefully attended to the experimental stimuli. Of the 1,500 respondents who completed the survey, nearly half failed the manipulation check. Those who failed the manipulation check spent significantly less time with the study (Mann-Whitney U=188627.50, p<.001). Data for those who failed the manipulation check were discarded from the statistical analysis. Furthermore, some survey items were counter-valenced in order to detect any respondents who might select responses in a single column for all items (for example, someone who chooses "strongly agree"

for every item). All those who gave identically-valenced responses for the nine Likert-type items were removed from the data (n=55). Lastly, four respondents selected "under 18" in the age question, and as this survey's target sample was adults, data for these respondents were discarded. The final sample used for data analysis consisted of 755 respondents.

	Number of respondents by article		
	Trauma in Schools	Homelessness	Clothing In India
Solutions	119	136	152
Non-Solutions	117	107	124

Of those 755 respondents:
- 64% are female
- The median age range is 45-54 years old
- The median education level completed by the respondents is "some college"
- The median yearly income range is $50,000-$75,0000
- 34% self-identify as conservative, 31% self-identify as liberals, and 32% indicate that they are neither/middle of the road
- 79% identify themselves as white, 11% identify as black, 6% identify as Asian, and 5% identify as Hispanic
- 9% identify as self-employed, 45% as employed by someone else, 9% as unemployed, 12% as homemakers, 18% as retired, and 7% as students

Alex Curry (alexcurry@utexas.edu) is a doctoral student in the Department of Communication Studies and a Research Associate with the Engaging News Project at the University of Texas at Austin. The Engaging News Project is directed by Natalie (Talia) Jomini Stroud, an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Studies and Assistant Director of Research at the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life. The Engaging News Project is grateful for funding and support from the Democracy Fund, Hewlett Foundation, Department of Communication Studies, Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life, and the Moody College of Communication.

Keith H. Hammonds (keith@solutionsjournalism.org) is chief operating officer of the Solutions Journalism Network, an independent, non-profit organization formed to legitimatize and spread the practice of solutions journalism. The Solutions Journalism Network is grateful for the support of the Einhorn Family Charitable Trust to underwrite this study.

The A/B test was funded by the Solutions Journalism Network and produced in collaboration with a team of students at Brigham Young University – Debbie Adams, James Brandenburg, and Kali Smith. SJN is grateful for the support of the university's Ballard Center for Economic Self-Reliance.

---

[1] This study qualifies as a quasi-experiment, as opposed to a full experiment, because we include only data from those who did not fail the manipulation check. Those reading a solutions article were more likely to answer the manipulation check correctly than those reading a non-solutions article. This means that the resulting sample is neither randomly assigned nor randomly selected from the population. To mitigate this concern, we analyzed, and controlled for, demographic factors that vary among the conditions. When data analysis is conducted using those who passed *and* those who failed the manipulation check, (n = 1,443), evidence of significant, albeit more modest, findings remain. In this case, those exposed to a solutions journalism article are significantly more likely than their non-solutions counterparts to: Feel that they had gained new knowledge about the topic from reading the article, indicate that they felt inspired and/or optimistic after reading the article, and believe that there are effective ways to address the issue.

[2] Associated Press and the Context-Based Research Group. (2008). A new model for news: Studying the deep structure of young-adult news consumption. Available online at: http://rumble.me/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/A-New-model-for-news.pdf

[3] For most questions, survey takers were asked to indicate their level of agreement with certain statements. For example, one set of questions was put to survey takers as follows: "Based on your overall response to this article, rate your level of agreement with the following statements: The article increased my interest in this topic." Response options were as follows: Strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. In four instances, statistical analyses revealed that responses were influenced not only by exposure to the solutions v. non-solutions articles, but also by the topic of the articles. Those four instances include responses to the following statements: the article is different than the typical article; there are ways to effectively address the issue; I feel more informed after reading the article; and Likelihood of reading more articles about the issue. For each of these questions, the differences between solutions and non-solutions articles appear for two issues (trauma, homeless), but not for the third (clothing). While the topic differences affected responses, responses were significantly affected by the presence or absence of the solutions-based article. The variable Article is Different was significantly different for solutions vs. non-solutions journalism $F[1, 717] = 14.69$, $p < .001$, controlling for age, gender, employment, and race.

[4] The variable Inspired was significantly different for solutions vs. non-solutions journalism $F[1, 717] = 160.62$, $p < .001$, controlling for age, gender, employment, and race.

[5] The variable Knowledge was significantly different for solutions vs. non-solutions journalism $F[1, 717] = 8.16$, $p < .01$, controlling for age, gender, employment, and race; the variable More Interested was significantly different for solutions vs. non-solutions journalism $F[1, 717] = 11.59$, $p = .001$, controlling for age, gender, employment, and race; and the variable Feel Informed was significantly different for solutions vs. non-solutions journalism $F[1, 717] = 19.01$, $p < .001$, controlling for age, gender, employment, and race.

[6] The knowledge item was phrased in this way in order to help determine if some respondents were clicking through survey items without reading the statements. This, and one other similarly phrased item, helped us detect 10 respondents who most likely clicked on responses without reading the accompanying statements. As discussed in the methodology section, data from these 10 respondents were not used in the statistical analyses.

[7] The variable Contribute was significantly different for solutions vs. non-solutions journalism $F[1, 717] = 19.13$, $p < .001$, controlling for age, gender, employment, and race; the variable Effective Solutions was significantly different for solutions vs. non-solutions journalism $F[1, 717] = 23.10$, $p < .001$, controlling for age, gender, employment, and race; and the variable Influenced Opinion was significantly different for solutions vs. non-solutions journalism $F[1, 717] = 15.13$, $p < .001$, controlling for age, gender, employment, and race.

[8] The variable Share Article was significantly different for solutions vs. non-solutions journalism $F[1, 717] = 11.88$, $p = .001$, controlling for age, gender, employment, and race; for the variable Read Article, was significantly different for solutions vs. non-solutions journalism $F[1, 717] = 18.02$, $p < .001$, controlling for age, gender, employment, and race; for the variable Read News, was significantly different for solutions vs. non-solutions journalism $F[1, 717] = 16.94$, $p < .001$, controlling for age, gender, employment, and race; and for the variable Read Issue, was significantly different for solutions vs. non-solutions journalism $F[1, 717] = 17.23$, $p < .001$, controlling for age, gender, employment, and race.

[9] The variable Involved was significantly different for solutions vs. non-solutions journalism $F[1, 717] = 17.58$, $p < .001$, controlling for age, gender, employment, and race; for the variable Donate, was significantly different for solutions vs. non-solutions journalism $F[1, 717] = 17.98$, $p < .001$, controlling for age, gender, employment, and race; and for the variable Talk Friends, was significantly different for solutions vs. non-solutions journalism $F[1, 717] = 16.13$, $p < .001$, controlling for age, gender, employment, and race.

[10] The variable Learn More was significantly different for solutions vs. non-solutions journalism $F[1, 717] = 12.91$, $p < .001$, controlling for age, gender, employment, and race.

[11] See the Solutions Journalism Network's webinar for Poynter's News University. For more information, visit: http://solutionsjournalism.org/2014/05/08/join-us-april-30th-at-200pedt-for-a-webinar-covering-what-works-without-the-fluff/

[12] Associated Press and the Context-Based Research Group, A new model for news; Benesh, S. (1998). The rise of solutions journalism. *Columbia Journalism Review*; Feinberg, M., & Robb, W. (2010). Apocalypse soon? Dire messages reduce belief in global warming by contradicting just-world beliefs. *Psychological Science*, *22*(1), 34-38; Glassner, B., (2004). Narrative techniques of fear mongering. *Social Research: An International Quarterly, 71*(4), 819-826; Merritt, D. (1998). *Public journalism and public life: Why telling the truth is not enough*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; Patterson, T. (2002). Why is the news so negative these days? George Mason University History News Network, http://hnn.us/article/1134, Pauly, J. J. (2009). Is journalism interested in resolution, or only in conflict? *Marquette Law Review, 93*(1), 7-23.

[13] See, for instance, Potter, D., & Gantz, W. (2000). Bringing viewers back to local TV news. *Civic Catalyst Newsletter,* Pew Center for Civic Journalism, http://www.pewcenter.org/doingcj/civiccat/displayCivcat.php?id=261; Foerstel, H. N. (2001). From Watergate to Monicagate: Ten controversies in modern journalism and media. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press..

[14] For example, see: Baumgartner, S. E., & Wirth, W. (2012). Affective priming during the processing of news articles. *Media Psychology*, *15*(1), 1–18; Grabe, M. E. (2006). Hard wired for negative news? Gender differences in processing broadcast news. *Communication Research*, *33*(5), 346–369.

[15] Associated Press and the Context-Based Research Group, A new model for news.

[16] Biswas, R., Riffe, D., & Zillmann, D. (1994). Mood influence on the appeal of bad news. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *71*(3), 689–696. See also Newhagen, J. E., & Reeves, B. (1992). The evening's bad news: Effects of compelling negative television news images on memory. *Journal of Communication*, *42*(2), 25–41.

[17] Associated Press and the Context-Based Research Group, A new model for news; Benesh, The rise of solutions journalism.

[18] Enda, J., & Mitchell, A. (2014). Americans show signs of leaving a news outlet, citing less information. The Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism. The State of the News Media 2013: An Annual Report on American Journalism. Retrieved from http://stateofthemedia.org/2013/special-reports-landing-page/citing-reduced-quality-many-americans-abandon-news-outlets/

[19] Enda & Mitchell, Americans show signs of leaving a news outlet.

[20] Responses to the open-ended item were analyzed by the Solution Journalism Network's Rikha Sharma Rani, using a Stanford University-developed sentiment analysis program called NaSent. Results from NaSent analysis indicated that responses were more positive and less negative for those who read the solutions version of the homelessness and clothing-in-India articles, as well as less negative for those who read the solutions version of the trauma article.

APPENDIX: TEXT OF THE SOLUTIONS AND NON-SOLUTIONS ARTICLES

Below, we include the full text of the articles used in the study design.

On Trauma in Schools (NON-SOLUTIONS VERSION)

Over the past 15 years, researchers have learned that highly stressful — and potentially traumatic — childhood experiences are more prevalent than previously understood. Now scientists are shedding light on the mechanisms by which they change the brain and body. These insights have far-reaching implications for schools, where it's still standard practice to punish children for misbehavior that they often do not know how to control. This is comparable to punishing a child for having a seizure; it adds to the suffering and makes matters worse.

In a study of 2,100 elementary students in 10 schools in Spokane, Wash., for example, researchers from Washington State University found that more than 20 percent had two or more "adverse childhood experiences" (having been homeless, witnessing domestic violence or having a parent who uses drugs or is incarcerated). Compared with children with no known stresses, these kids are two to four times more likely to have problems with attendance, behavior, academics and health. As the number of adverse experiences increase, the students fare considerably worse on all counts.

When a child violates rules or expectations, the standard response is to try to reason with the child or use punishment, explained Chris Blodgett, clinical psychologist at Washington State University. "What the science tells us about how stressed brains react to change, loss or threat is that children will often violate rules because they feel profoundly out of control. It's a survival reaction and it may actually be intended to control the situation."

What good are the best teachers or schools if the most vulnerable kids feel so unsafe that they are unavailable to learn? How far can education reforms take us when schools can't manage the behavior problems of many early graders or preschoolers — as indicated by the crisis of school suspensions? (Suspension rates have risen dramatically since the 1970s, particularly among minority children.)

"We serve a high impact population with lots of needs," explained Beverly Lund, Whitman Elementary School's principal in Spokane, Wash. "We started dabbling with the idea of learning about trauma, and the more we got into it, the more we realized we had to significantly change the way we're relating to kids."

In Brockton, Mass., Angelo Elementary Principal Ryan Powers organized a Saturday workshop so the school staff could learn about childhood trauma. One of the presenters was Edward G. Jacoubs, from the Plymouth County district attorney's office. "There was a jaw-dropping moment when Ed overlayed the map of the Brockton School District with maps of gun violence and drug offenses," recalled Powers. "Everyone realized, 'Wow, this is what our kids are seeing,' and the staff asked, 'What can we do?'"

On Trauma in Schools (SOLUTIONS VERSION)

Over the past 15 years, researchers have learned that highly stressful — and potentially traumatic — childhood experiences are more prevalent than previously understood. Now scientists are shedding light on the mechanisms by which they change the brain and body. These insights have far-reaching implications for schools, where it's still standard practice to punish children for misbehavior that they often do not know how to control. This is comparable to punishing a child for having a seizure; it adds to the suffering and makes matters worse.

In a study of 2,100 elementary students in 10 schools in Spokane, Wash., for example, researchers from Washington State University found that more than 20 percent had two or more "adverse childhood experiences" (having been homeless, witnessing domestic violence or having a parent who uses drugs or is incarcerated). Compared with children with no known stresses, these kids are two to four times more likely to have problems with attendance, behavior, academics and health. As the number of adverse experiences increase, the students fare considerably worse on all counts.

When a child violates rules or expectations, the standard response is to try to reason with the child or use punishment, explained Chris Blodgett, clinical psychologist at Washington State University. "What the science tells us about how stressed brains react to change, loss or threat is that children will often violate rules because they feel profoundly out of control. It's a survival reaction and it may actually be intended to control the situation."

What good are the best teachers or schools if the most vulnerable kids feel so unsafe that they are unavailable to learn? How far can education reforms take us when schools can't manage the behavior problems of many early graders or preschoolers — as indicated by the crisis of school suspensions? (Suspension rates have risen dramatically   since the 1970s, particularly among minority children.)

Blodgett and his colleagues have been helping educators in 20 schools across Washington to make use of the emerging research on trauma. One of their partners is the Whitman Elementary School, in Spokane. "We serve a high impact population with lots of needs," explained Beverly Lund, the school's principal. "We started dabbling with the idea of learning about trauma, and the more we got into it, the more we realized we had to significantly change the way we're relating to kids."

To do it well meant making sure that everyone in the school community — teachers, cafeteria workers, playground monitors, office staff, even bus drivers — understood the effects of trauma on children, Lund said. It meant helping teachers move away from reflexive discipline and toward responses that help kids learn how to calm themselves.

In Brockton, Mass., Angelo Elementary Principal Ryan Powers organized a Saturday workshop so the school staff could learn about childhood trauma. One of the presenters was Edward G. Jacoubs, from the Plymouth County district attorney's office. "There was a jaw dropping moment when Ed overlayed the map of the Brockton School District with maps of gun violence and drug offenses," recalled Powers. "Everyone realized, 'Wow, this is what our kids are seeing,' and the staff asked, 'What can we do?'"

"This is about changing the whole school environment," explained Susan Cole, a former special education teacher who directs the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative. "You can have a great trauma-sensitive classroom, but if the child goes into the hall or cafeteria and gets yelled at, he can get retriggered. It's about creating a common context that keeps kids feeling safe."

Elizabeth Barry, who is now the executive director of K-8 learning and teaching for the Brockton school district, says the changes have significantly improved learning time and school climate. At the Baker school, after two years, office referrals are down 75 percent from the baseline. "That's the number that I find most meaningful," she said. "When teachers are less inclined to send a child to the office, it speaks to their capacity and commitment to support all children socially, emotionally, behaviorally and academically."

Homeless Families in New York City (NON-SOLUTIONS VERSION)

The population in New York's homeless shelters has soared. In 2002, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg entered office with an aggressive plan to combat homelessness. However, during his tenure the number of homeless families in the city increased by 80 percent, with the nightly shelter population peaking at more than 53,000 this past November, up from 31,000 12 years ago.

The city has lagged behind the nation when it comes to acting rapidly to get families out of shelters and providing them with the help they need to remain stable in their own housing (this requires more than short-term rental subsidies). Over the past four years, the average shelter stay for families in the city has increased from about 250 days to over 400. (The federal government's standard is that shelter stays should be limited to 30 days.)

This isn't a problem unique to New York City. In 2011, some 8.5 million low-income families across the country were paying more than half their income on housing, a severe cost burden.

Some families experience recurrent episodes of homelessness; they need considerably more help. These families are not representative of the city's shelter population. It's estimated that only 5 to 8 percent of homeless families are "multi-system-involved" — contending with a variety of problems such as substance abuse, foster care, depression, disabilities and so forth.

Homelessness is a symptom of deeper problems. "What is wrong with the picture of the most troubled multi-system involved families, with children with disabilities, being sheltered in the worst run facility for years?" asks Rosanne Haggerty, president of Community Solutions. "They should have gotten the highest quality help, in the most stable place. How are we matching resources?"

Dennis Culhane, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, explains, "Whatever the problems are — addictions, bad financial management, mental health — none of those things are helped by being in a shelter. It just multiplies the problems at tremendous expense."

Homeless Families in New York City (SOLUTIONS VERSION)

The population in New York's homeless shelters has soared. In 2002, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg entered office with an aggressive plan to combat homelessness. However, during his tenure the number of homeless families in the city increased by 80 percent, with the nightly shelter population peaking at more than 53,000 this past November, up from 31,000 12 years ago.

In the past few years, cities have been moving away from long-term shelter and focusing, instead, on developing better ways to identify and prioritize chronically homeless individuals and families, prevent crises, and rapidly re-house people, using short- or long-term assistance as needed.

Amid these changes, New York City has remained an outlier — in some areas, an innovator, in others, a laggard. The city's homelessness prevention program, Homebase, served as a model for other cities. This July, an evaluation reported that the program reduced the proportion of families entering shelter from 14.5 percent to 8 percent. Surprisingly, Homebase-served families who entered shelter exited much sooner, too – staying, on average, 120 nights as opposed to 233 nights for the control group. With better targeting, experts believe the program could have significantly more impact.

But the city has lagged behind the nation when it comes to acting rapidly to get families out of shelters and providing them with the help they need to remain stable in their own housing (this requires more than short-term rental subsidies). Over the past four years, the average shelter stay for families in the city has increased from about 250 days to over 400. (The federal government's standard is that shelter stays should be limited to 30 days.)

There's no solution to homelessness without building or preserving more affordable housing and simultaneously attacking poverty. This isn't a problem unique to New York City. In 2011, some 8.5 million low-income families across the country were paying more than half their income on housing, a severe cost burden.

However, the city could make significant advances in the near-term if it improves the way it assesses families and matches them with services. Homeless families are not all alike. Nationally, some 70 to 80 percent of families escape homelessness within three to six months and do not return to shelters. The rapid re-housing approach has shown that these families primarily need help finding housing, short-term rental subsidies and job assistance.

But some families experience recurrent episodes of homelessness; they need considerably more help. These families are not representative of the city's shelter population. It's estimated that only 5 to 8 percent of homeless families are "multi-system-involved" — contending with a variety of problems such as substance abuse, foster care, depression, disabilities and so forth.

For them, homelessness is a symptom of deeper problems. "What is wrong with the picture of the most troubled multi-system involved families, with children with disabilities, being sheltered in the worst run facility for years?" asks Rosanne Haggerty, president of Community Solutions. "They should have gotten the highest quality help, in the most stable place. How are we matching resources?"

Dennis Culhane, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, explains, "Whatever the problems are — addictions, bad financial management, mental health. None of those things are helped by being in a shelter. It just multiplies the problems at tremendous expense."

What could help is expanding a program like Home to Stay, which seeks to move families that repeatedly lose their housing into permanent housing. Home to Stay uses an evidence-based protocol designed to motivate heads of families over nine months to build problem solving skills and strengthen their networks. The program also helps heads of families take advantage of programs to manage things like addiction or mental health issues, mediate family conflicts, or improve their job prospects.

It's problem-solving conversations like these that need to become the rule rather than the exception. "We need to identify by name those multi-system-involved families who are experiencing regular crises, prioritize them, and match them with the right kind and amount of help they need to get back on their feet for good," says Haggerty of Community Solutions.

The Bridge between Clothing and Dignity (NON-SOLUTIONS VERSION)

The sign on the cart read: "Disposer of Dead Bodies." The cart owner, a man named Habib, was paid about 50 cents per body.

Habib respectfully wrapped the bodies in the white cloth he was issued by the police. Most were of migrants wearing tattered rags who had likely come to Delhi to find work. Habib said that in summer he collected four or five bodies a night. In winter, it was a different story. When a cold wave hits Delhi, temperatures can drop below freezing. "In winter," Habib said, "I have so much work. I can't handle it."

One of the most glaring oversights in the field of development is the lack of attention to clothing. Despite the explosion of growth in recent decades, hundreds of millions of Indians still live in conditions of extreme material deprivation. Somewhere between 40 percent and 80 percent of the population subsist on 50 or 60 cents a day, according to government estimates.

For very poor people, clothing is shelter. "In earthquakes, the shake kills people; in a tsunami, the water kills people; but in winter, the cold does not kill people. It's the lack of proper clothing," says journalist Anshu Gupta. "Why don't we consider lack of clothing a disaster?"

Torn, threadbare cloth is the most visible sign of poverty. "In India, for a woman, the first priority is to cover herself," says Gupta. "Even more than eating." It's hard for Westerners or middle-class Indians to relate to this level of material existence.

Many Indians possess only one or two items of clothing, notes Gupta. A woman with one sari must conceal herself while it dries after washing. And many women stay hidden indoors during their menstrual cycles because of orthodox religious beliefs and because they have no proper undergarments and only a piece of cloth to serve as a sanitary napkin.

"Everyone in the world has a right to a dignified life, not just the chance to survive," Gupta adds. "Clothing and dignity go hand in hand."

The Bridge between Clothing and Dignity (SOLUTIONS VERSION)

The sign on the cart read: "Disposer of Dead Bodies." The cart owner, a man named Habib, was paid about 50 cents per body.

Habib respectfully wrapped the bodies in the white cloth he was issued by the police. Most were of migrants wearing tattered rags who had likely come to Delhi to find work. Habib said that in summer he collected four or five bodies a night. In winter, it was a different story. When a cold wave hits Delhi, temperatures can drop below freezing. "In winter," Habib said, "I have so much work. I can't handle it."

One of the most glaring oversights in the field of development is the lack of attention to clothing. Despite the explosion of growth in recent decades, hundreds of millions of Indians still live in conditions of extreme material deprivation. Somewhere between 40 percent and 80 percent of the population subsist on 50 or 60 cents a day, according to government estimates.

For very poor people, clothing is shelter. "In earthquakes, the shake kills people; in a tsunami, the water kills people; but in winter, the cold does not kill people. It's the lack of proper clothing," says journalist Anshu Gupta. "Why don't we consider lack of clothing a disaster?"

Torn, threadbare cloth is the most visible sign of poverty. "In India, for a woman, the first priority is to cover herself," says Gupta. "Even more than eating." It's hard for Westerners or middle-class Indians to relate to this level of material existence. Many Indians possess only one or two items of clothing, notes Gupta. A woman with one sari must conceal herself while it dries after washing. And many women stay hidden indoors during their menstrual cycles because of orthodox religious beliefs and because they have no proper undergarments and only a piece of cloth to serve as a sanitary napkin.

So, in 1998, the Guptas started an organization, Goonj (meaning "echo"), to redistribute clothing to where it was most needed. Today, Goonj operates collection centers in nine Indian cities and provides about two million pounds of materials, mostly clothes, but also utensils, school supplies, footwear, toys and many other items. It has an annual budget of $550,000, 150 employees, and hundreds of volunteers. However, with more than 250 N.G.O. partner agencies, it will assist about a half a million people in 21 states this year.

Goonj is bringing efficiency and integrity to work that is often handled carelessly and without consideration for the lasting effects on communities. It is getting middle-class Indians to recognize the tremendous value of material reuse and recycling in the context of their country's poverty. It makes optimal use of the materials it receives. And it has found a way to assist villagers that moves beyond the stigma of charity, through a program called "Cloth for Work" — which links clothes to self-organized development activities in villages.

Local organizations contact Goonj to participate in the Cloth for Work program. They propose a development activity — building a bridge, repairing a road, digging a well, building a school. In exchange, each laborer receives a family pack – a kind of currency in cloth: two full outfits for four people, roughly 600 rupees worth of clothes ($12 value today).

"Unfortunately, the biggest problem with donation is you give what you have," Gupta says. "You often don't give what people need. Somewhere we need to dignify giving by shifting the focus from donor's pride to receiver's dignity."

"Everyone in the world has a right to a dignified life, not just the chance to survive," Gupta adds. "Clothing and dignity go hand in hand."