

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

Episode 40: The Power of Solutions Journalism

- Tristan Harris: The Center for Humane Technology is hiring for three full-time roles, a director of mobilization, a digital manager for communications, and a senior producer for this show, Your Undivided Attention. We're especially excited about candidates who are aligned with our mission, and that's why we wanted to share these openings with you, our listeners. To learn more, please visit humanetech.com/careers.
- Tristan Harris: And with that, here we go. What is the goal of our digital information environment? Is it just to give us accurate information about the world or to also empower us to act in the world? Is it just to give us information about social challenges that we endlessly doom scroll? Or to empower us to respond to those challenges.
- Tristan Harris: At the Center for Humane Technology, we believe technology should be designed to create an empowering relationship with reality and the problems that we face. And that should also be the case for journalism and information. I'm Tristan Harris.
- Aza Raskin: And I'm Aza Raskin.
- Tristan Harris: And this is Your Undivided Attention. The podcast from the Center for Humane Technology. Today in the show, we're going to explore solutions journalism, the practice of rigorously reporting on how we respond to social problems so we're better able to address them.
- Tristan Harris: Here to guide us through that exploration are Tina Rosenberg and H  l  ne Biandudi Hofer. Tina is a co-founder of the organization at the heart of this work, the Solutions Journalism Network. And H  l  ne is the former manager of SJN's initiative, Complicating the Narratives. First, we're going to hear from Tina about the origins of solutions journalism, and then we'll hear from a H  l  ne about the specific initiatives and techniques, like Complicating the Narratives.
- Tristan Harris: Welcome to Your Undivided Attention. I am absolutely pleased today to have two incredible guests, Tina Rosenberg and H  l  ne Biandudi Hofer from the Solutions Journalism Network. Tina and H  l  ne, welcome to the program.
- Tina Rosenberg: Thanks, Tristan. It's a pleasure to be here.
- H  l  ne Biandudi Hofer: Thank you.
- Tristan Harris: First, I would love to explain to listeners what is solutions journalism and how did you get into rethinking journalism?
- Tina Rosenberg: Solutions Journalism Network did not invent solutions journalism, and some of the major practitioners of it probably are unaware they're practicing it. They're doing it, but they don't have a name for it. Like Michael Lewis, for example. Most of his books are solutions journalism

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

Episode 40: The Power of Solutions Journalism

books. But this came out, for me, of a story that I was doing a long time ago, 20 years ago in the New York Times Sunday magazine. And I pitched my editor on a story about the price of aids medicines in poor countries. And the fact that in countries where the AIDS burden was the highest, the medicines were completely unaffordable.

Tina Rosenberg: Now, everybody knew that, but what they didn't know was the why. So I wanted to do an investigative story about the why. And the why was pressure from the pharmaceutical industry and from whatever government was in power in Washington. At the time it was Clinton, but it didn't matter — to put political pressure on countries not to make or buy generic versions of drugs. So I pitched that to my editor and he said no. He said, It's too depressing. We cannot inflict another long piece on our readers about how everybody with HIV is going to die in Malawi.

Tina Rosenberg: So I went home and I rethought it, and I turned it inside out. There was one country that was making its own generic versions of drugs and defying the pressure from Washington and from pharmaceutical companies/ And providing the drugs for free to all its people who needed them. And that was Brazil. So the piece then became what Brazil was doing. And in the process of telling that story, I could say everything I wanted to say about the bad behavior that Brazil had to fend off in order to do this. And how other countries were not able to fend off that bad behavior.

Tina Rosenberg: So this was a totally different approach to the story, and I think far, far, far better. First of all, got into the paper. But it was fresh. People did know that everyone with HIV was going to die in Malawi. They didn't know that those people in Brazil were living normal lifespans. And it had a lot of impact because at the time the pharmaceutical industry was arguing that we can't let poor countries try to give out these medicines because they'll screw it up for the rest of us and create drug resistance. And Brazil showed that that was not true.

Tina Rosenberg: So this showed a model of how AIDS drugs could reach the people who really need them. And from then on every time I set out to do a story that my editor would say, "That's too depressing," which for me is, was about 100% of the time. I would ask, "Is there a possible solutions angle to the story?" And that was my introduction to it.

Aza Raskin: How do you define solutions journalism? How is it different than normal journalism?

Tina Rosenberg: So solutions journalism is looking at and covering how people are trying to solve problems, not celebrating them, covering them. We have four qualities that a solutions story has to meet. It has to, first of all, be about a response to a problem. It can't be just about a person. Second of all, it has to look at what the evidence is of success or failure. What do we know about how well this is working? Third of all, it has to be informational and not just inspirational.

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

Episode 40: The Power of Solutions Journalism

- Tina Rosenberg: It's not something that just makes you feel good about the human condition. Sometimes it doesn't at all make you feel good about the human condition. But it must provide information that other people with the problem would be interested in knowing. And fourth of all and very important, it has to cover the limitations. What is not working about this response? Because this is good journalism. We're not trying to do PR here. We're actually going to examine what is and what is not working about it.
- Tina Rosenberg: So a good solutions journalism story does that. And it's not a tool you would use for breaking news. It's a tool you would use for feature or enterprise stories about issues that are widely shared. Because if a problem is widely shared that means lots of different people are trying to solve it. And some of those solutions will be interesting, newsworthy, successful and worth reporting on.
- Tina Rosenberg: One of my favorite examples is from the Cleveland Plain Dealer now defunct, unfortunately, but they had done several series on the problem of lead paint among children in Cleveland. And nothing had happened as a result. Lots of blah-blah-blah from politicians, but no real change. Then they did another series that had a traditional investigative component, but also looked at what other cities were doing that was working.
- Tina Rosenberg: And these were cities like Cleveland. For example, Rochester, New York, home of Hélène Biandudi Hofer. And they were doing a better job overall on the issue of children and lead paint. So they did a big story on what Rochester was doing. They also took little bites of the subject, Akron, Grand Rapids, places around the Midwest that were solving a little piece of the problem. For example, one of the cities made a registry of houses that were dangerous. Another one was proactively testing kids in school.
- Tina Rosenberg: So the way this works is that if you just do a story saying "Cleveland has a bad problem" then Cleveland's officials are going to say, "Oh yes, this is a bad problem. And we are doing the best we can about this bad problem." But if you have a solution story, you can point to what Rochester is doing and say, "No, you're not."
- Tina Rosenberg: Because over here, they've got our resources and they're doing better. That is what is profoundly embarrassing to officials. And that is what creates change. And this did create change. It created double the budget for lead. It doubled the staff Cleveland, adopted many of the programs that other cities were using. And the city council overhauled the lead law. It made a huge change. And that is an example of a solutions approach.
- Tina Rosenberg: Who's doing it better? If it sounds like public relations, then you're doing it wrong. It isn't public relations. It's not sort of feel good news. It's not cheerleading. It's not advocacy. It's serious reporting. But what you're reporting on is an effort to solve a problem. You're going to look at what's happening here. Usually, you're going to have the luxury of time

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

Episode 40: The Power of Solutions Journalism

and space. If you have that kind of luxury at your news organization, to look at it step-by-step.

Tina Rosenberg: Well, they had this problem. Then they tried to do this. Oh, well, that didn't work. So they tried something else that had too much political opposition. Well, then they tried this and that seemed to work. And you can tell people how they went from having problem A, to getting to a solution B. You have to be really careful not to whitewash it, not to say this is The Solution to The Problem.

Tina Rosenberg: There's no such thing as a perfect program. And no one will believe you if you say there is. So just talk about the limitations. Here's what's not working. But here's what might not be replicable elsewhere. Here's something that did work and then later on, it started to not work, and why. So it's really, in a sense investigative reporting, but what you're investigating is the response to a problem.

Tristan Harris: One thing that I think journalists tend to feel in the past is if we just report on the problem, then magically someone else is going to come along later and they're going to solve it. And in this case, what you're saying is we actually need to intentionally package and look to positive deviants. Where is this working? And that only by showing people positive examples, can we expect a story to maybe even lead to some positive change.

Tina Rosenberg: Yeah. I'm not really thrilled with how well that, 'We expose a problem and someone will then solve it' works. It's pretty rare when there's a solution that comes out of that. And it's obvious why. If you're a parent, you can't just tell your kid everything they're doing wrong. You have to model good behavior. You have to describe good behavior. You have to say your friends are doing this. People need to know that someone just like me can do this and therefore I can too. That model is really, really important. We need to do it for society just like we need to do it for our kids.

Tristan Harris: One of the things I hear you saying is, typically when there's a story and some of the most important topics in the world are depressing. I mean, whether it's homelessness, criminal justice reform, climate change, the things that we would want to put our attention on, that are worth your undivided attention often feel disempowering and we get learned helplessness from reading it.

Aza Raskin: In this study on learned helplessness or learned hopelessness, perhaps in the new sense, the original study was done with dogs and they would shock the dog. The cage was closed, they couldn't leave. And eventually they opened the cage, so the dog could leave and the dog just would not leave because it learned there's nothing it could do. The only way the dog learned to leave is that somebody had to show it how to leave. They

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

Episode 40: The Power of Solutions Journalism

would come in, lead it out, gave it an example of what to do, and after that, they could overcome learned helplessness.

Aza Raskin: When I think about solutions journalism, it's sort of solving an imagination gap. It's showing an existence proof for one solution. And once you see one solution, it's much easier to start to see, two, ten, fifteen, a hundred solutions.

Tina Rosenberg: Yeah, I think that's exactly right, Aza. The research shows that by far, the biggest reason people tune out from the news is the negativity of it and how powerless it makes us feel. And, it has had a tremendous impact on the business of journalism. I mean, we produce a product that is painful to consume, and then we wonder why nobody wants to pay for it. I'm a total believer in investigative journalism first of all. I think it's hugely important and we do not need less of it.

Tina Rosenberg: The problem is that the vast majority of reporters define the very term of a news as, what's wrong. It just doesn't occur to us to report on stuff that's going right. And, there's many, many reasons behind that. People say all the time, "Oh, we report on the plane that crashes, not the plane that doesn't crash." And of course that's true. But if you're talking about a widespread problem, like access to mental healthcare or the disparity in education achievement according to your income, or any problem like that, we're accustomed to reading about only failure.

Tina Rosenberg: We should be reporting on what folks have done, that's succeeding, where other people have not been able to succeed.

Tristan Harris: Typically, when you look at the decline of trust in institutions or in society or in political parties, people think it's due to the rise of partisan media or partisan radio or these polarizing news channels recently, but you had sort of a different answer. Why has trust been falling in your research in solutions journalism?

Tina Rosenberg: Pollsters often asked as a measure of trust, do you generally think other people are good? And if people answer yes to that, then they have trust in other people. And that number started to fall. Before cable news even existed, well before social media existed. It started to fall in the mid-1970s. And one reason was that we were shown that we can't trust our government. The Vietnam war and Watergate were showing us that in the mid '70s. But another was that journalism took a really pronounced turn towards the concept that we only look for what's wrong. Focusing on the negative.

Tina Rosenberg: Investigative journalism became the highest form of journalism, which I do agree with, but all journalism turned in that direction. It was a welcome change in some ways, because up until then, journalism had given people in political power, a free hall pass to do as they pleased and not hold people to account.

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

Episode 40: The Power of Solutions Journalism

- Tina Rosenberg: So holding people in power to account was very necessary and it still is more than ever, but it was not balanced in any way by showing what people were doing that was right. The focus on the negative, 100% of the time, has led to a huge decline in people trusting institutions and worse, our trust in each other. And so that number of people who think others are good right now has fallen to, it was about 12% last time I saw the figure. And a lot of that is due to what we see in journalism. What we see of people we don't know is what the media shows us.
- Tina Rosenberg: And very often with marginalized communities, especially, that's just their worst stereotype. If I live on the southwest side of Chicago and someone knocks on my door and they're a journalist, I know they're there to ask me about gun violence, because that's the only story for journalists, even though that's not the only thing that goes on in my community.
- Tina Rosenberg: One of the newsrooms we work with at Solutions Journalism Network is the Montgomery Advertiser in Montgomery, Alabama. The first I went there, I asked journalists there, "What do you guys think of mainstream media coverage of Alabama?" And they all said, "We hate it. It's awful." I said, "Why?" And they said, "Well, they only choose stories that make us look like ignorant yahoos." Those stories are not inaccurate. But there's also things they do that don't make them look like ignorant yahoos, and they said, "You're not interested in those stories." And that's the truth, because we go to find the people with four teeth.
- Tina Rosenberg: I mean, we go to confirm our worst stereotypes and that then builds this picture in people's minds. So that's not creating a true version of the world, which is what journalism is supposed to do. It's supposed to hold an accurate mirror up to society,. So society can change. We're holding a distorted mirror up to society. We have to show the things that are going on in Alabama, that they're doing, to solve problems that don't make them look like ignorant yahoos.
- Tina Rosenberg: We have to go to communities like Englewood in Chicago, and write about what people are doing to solve their own problems. Including gun violence, but also other things, because that is not the only thing in their lives. And that is one of the reasons that solutions journalism is so necessary to repair our civic fabric.
- Tina Rosenberg: Journalism is going through two different crises at once. We have our economic crisis, which began with Craigslist at the turn of the century and stripped newspapers of classified advertising. Google, Facebook now take, I don't know, 80% of all online ads. So newspapers no longer have advertising. And, a lot of them are trying to find different business models, subscriptions, memberships, philanthropy.
- Tina Rosenberg: They're hard to do, but the ones that are going to be successful at that are news organizations that do things differently. Advertising was a business model that sold a piece of the reader's attention to a company.

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

Episode 40: The Power of Solutions Journalism

Just like you say The Social Dilemma, which is what social media does. The new forms of revenue for newspapers or any news organization, sell journalism to readers. It's a very different equation, and it's one that's much more aligned with good journalism

Tristan Harris: Sometimes with our work on Your Undivided Attention and post the film, The Social Dilemma, I'm very self-conscious about the fact that we dwell on the problems. I don't actually want to leave people with hopelessness about the very problems around social media that I think so many people feel. I actually don't want people to leave feeling depressed about the state of the world or technology, but I also want to be very pragmatic. So for Aza and I, as your clients that you would teach to communicate in a more solutions-oriented way, would you give us maybe an example of how we might do our work differently here? Question for both of you.

Tina Rosenberg: Sure. H  l  ne and I are not experts on social media, but we can give you the system for how you would do that investigation yourself. So one thing you would do is cut the problem into small slices. So what's a small slice of the problem that you think is important?

Tristan Harris: Let's see. We could take funding models. We could take metrics for tech companies or design choices. Let's take funding models.

Tina Rosenberg: Okay. State the problem.

Tristan Harris: So the problem there is that we have venture capital who as soon as they get involved in any small social media company or startup or alternative to Facebook or YouTube or Instagram or whatever, if it's funded by venture capital, they expect this sort of grow at all costs grow to a thousand X mentality. So the problem is, as soon as you take venture capital, you've often undercut your capacity to actually do the humane good thing for people because you've locked yourself into a growth trajectory and treadmill that will take you off of that, and that can feel really disempowering to people.

Tina Rosenberg: Same is true by the way of hedge funds and newspapers. Half the news audience in the United States is now owned by hedge funds. Okay. So the problem is that the venture capital model is too prevalent in funding startups. Who's doing a better job? Do you know of another place? It doesn't have to be another country, although it could be, or a part of the industry or another industry that's comparable, where they either had that problem and no longer have it, or they don't have it. They're doing something different to fund startups.

Tristan Harris: You're making me think of organizations like Zebras Unite, which is trying to find different funding models for not expecting those kinds of returns. You're making me think of cryptocurrency-funded programs in which people are basically growing the wealth of a new — so let's say I have

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

Episode 40: The Power of Solutions Journalism

some new alternative to Facebook called Open Book. And Open Book is funded by Opencoins and I buy in with Opencoins.

Tristan Harris: So I'm actually participating as a user with skin in the game, in the growth of that network. And I, as an individual, who's buying as a user into that system, I'm not expecting it to grow to a thousand X. So there's some examples like that. The more you can send it in the direction that's good for us, and good for the people, and good for stakeholders as opposed to good for capital.

Aza Raskin: The other example of that is, all of the open source models. There's Mozilla, for instance, and Firefox. These are much rarer examples, but they do exist.

Hélène Biandudi Hofer: I guess at this point, the question would be the evidence of Zebras Unite and the cryptocurrency funded programs that you were mentioning, Mozilla. What's the evidence that could potentially or is working so that we can glean from that to see how that might impact this problem?

Tristan Harris: That's a great question. I know in your work in solutions journalism, you want to make sure you don't just cover the solution, but the limitations of that solution. So maybe things like Zebras Unite are working, but then there's a limitation to, in what context they work or up until what point, and then how do we get past that next boundary?

Tina Rosenberg: Very good. You're on your way.

Tristan Harris: So how do you teach journalists how to do the solutions journalism and go out there and train people to do this different kind of work?

Tina Rosenberg: When we started, the first newsroom we worked with was the Seattle Times. We wanted a newsroom that was very prestigious and had an investigative reputation because we needed the credibility and legitimacy that that offered us. So we helped them set up something called Education Lab, which is a package of stories every month on something that works in public education. It's still going on. It's a very successful project that now many other newsrooms around the United States and even overseas have duplicated.

Tina Rosenberg: But from there, it spread and we would call people, people would call us. Newsrooms would talk to other newsrooms. So we go into a newsroom with of course, permission of the leadership. We do a workshop that's usually two hours or so, and we help them understand what solutions journalism is and isn't. Why you should use it when appropriate, and how?

Tina Rosenberg: Mostly it's the how. How do you do it? How do you avoid advocacy? How do you find stories? And then we'll, after the workshop, we'll usually work with a specific small group of journalists that are doing a special project and help them bring a solutions angle to that project. So we do many,

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

Episode 40: The Power of Solutions Journalism

many, many other things now, including Hélène's project, Complicating the Narratives. We work with journalism schools. We have all sorts of stuff, but our meat and potatoes is still this training in newsrooms. We probably train 30,000 journalists.

Tina Rosenberg: Now, we work not only in the United States, but we have local organizations in different countries that are doing solutions journalism training throughout Latin America and Uganda, Kenya, Nigeria, parts of the Middle East, parts of Europe, all through Eastern and central Europe. I mean, this is really spreading. There's a demand for this.

Tina Rosenberg: Journalists can sometimes be a little resistant to this idea. Non-journalists get it instantly. Of course you should cover what's working. Readers and listeners and TV watchers want this. When we started, we thought we would have a lot of pushback against the idea. And, that we have not had. Usually, after about five minutes of explaining it, journalists understand that this is serious journalism. It's not fluff.

Tina Rosenberg: The big challenge has been turning that positive attitude into changed behavior. Because the systems that have been built into journalism are very, very powerful. What we've learned to define as news, how we do our jobs. And in an environment where newsrooms are closing all over the place. Newsrooms that used to have 40 people now have seven people. Journalists are completely overstretched and overworked. You have to do two or three stories a day. You can't do anything particularly interesting or special if you're doing that. And so, the resource crunch that ironically has been the thing that opened journalism up to this new idea is also the thing that's standing in the way of more people practicing it.

Tristan Harris: When I think about your training for journalists, and the way that you're teaching them, and like you said, sort of, the structures that are in place around typical journalism, I think about how we might train technologists to also think about humane technology. Because I think what solutions journalism is to traditional journalism, humane technology is a bit to technology. Both are operating with some new set of constraints and a new understanding of, how is the mind receiving information. Instead of just reporting on the facts and doing the gotchas and doing the investigations and letting someone solve it somewhere else downstream, we have to take a more conscious responsibility.

Tristan Harris: Then there's also the performance incentives, as you said. So for trained to measure our success on the number of stories we published per day, or as a technologist case, trained on how do we maximize engagement or time on site in a system of incentives, that's not wired for the new thing, which is the solutions journalism approach or a solutions technology empowering relationship to reality approach.

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

Episode 40: The Power of Solutions Journalism

Tristan Harris: We're also acknowledging a new reality of finite attention. Both the finite attention that a journalist has to gather information and the finite attention that a reader has to receive information. So if we just had even, overwhelmingly enlightening stories about problems that we face, but they were the biggest problems like climate change or homelessness or inequality or crime, but we didn't actually leave people with solutions, well in a finite world, everyone would just end up even more overwhelmed because we don't have enough attention to devote to, what would we do about any of these things.

Tristan Harris: In other words, if we care about people having some kind of empowering relationship to reality, we would have to package what people can do about it, with what information is being delivered. And I think technology all too often falls in the trap of just bombarding people, in information. I think, similar to the way that journalists are trained on objectivity and neutrality, technologists often want to say, "Well, who are we to say, what's good for people?" We need to also be neutral and we shouldn't make any conscious decisions about how we want to present information. I do see a lot of parallels in what you're trying to do and what we're trying to teach, I think technologists from a new paradigm.

Tina Rosenberg: Yeah. It's very hard to break the old ones. It's not hard to do great solutions journalism. It's hard to stop doing something else. So you can have time and resources to do great solutions journalism. Actually, the newsrooms that are going to survive are the ones that can break that old paradigm.

Tristan Harris: H el ene, you were teaching solutions journalism to journalists, is that right?

H el ene Biandudi Hofer: So I'm teaching an initiative at the Solutions Journalism Network called Complicating the Narratives. It does fold in solutions journalism for sure, but Complicating the Narratives is about helping journalists learn different ways to report on controversial issues. Ways that really don't inflame the conflict and continue to cause fear and division, but really help audiences make sense of what's going on with this issue? How do I make sense of this? So that I myself can think about the steps that I want to take or process how I plan to move forward or address this issue.

H el ene Biandudi Hofer: Complicating the Narrative is about providing context and understanding. You do need those two things when you're looking into solutions. I mean, that does pave the way for you to think about, "Okay, what are remedies to this issue?" So that's how we connect the two.

Tristan Harris: If you had to describe a kind of before and after picture of, here's the things we would approach in regular journalism. But when we're doing the Complicating the Narrative in this after picture, what new ways of providing understanding or context, is different in that environment?

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

Episode 40: The Power of Solutions Journalism

- Hélène Biandudi Hofer: Sure. So there's a few different ways. When we have a source and we're interviewing a source about a polarizing issue, it's likely that that source has a viewpoint, a perspective on that. They could be stuck in. Everyone, our own sources have bias. They have confirmation bias. Sometimes they only see things their way. As journalists, we want to present other viewpoints to our source as well to get their feedback, to see how they might respond to it, to see if they might understand where other people are coming from.
- Hélène Biandudi Hofer: In order to do that, the source does have to feel as though they've been heard first. Our sources oftentimes think that we are coming into an interview with an agenda. And this is really about wiping that idea clean. And being very clear with the source that listen, I really want to understand how you feel about this. I want to make sure that you are accurately portrayed in this story. That is what is most important for me.
- Hélène Biandudi Hofer: So expressing that, and making your source feel heard. And when that happens, you do open them up to considering other things, to considering other viewpoints, to being open to different ways of looking at things that counter their own views.
- Tina Rosenberg: Something exciting that we're just starting to teach is called asset framing. And this was developed by man named Trabian Shorters, who was a journalist and now runs a community called BME, community for Black Male Empowerment. Asset framing relies on research about the brain and how our unconscious mind makes connections and sets stories for us before our conscious mind can even kick in. It turns out that, the way we meet someone, the way we're introduced to that person, on first introduction, we associate them with a narrative in our mind.
- Tina Rosenberg: So if we are introduced to people, especially in marginalized communities, people who we may not know on our own, but if we're introduced to them through their deficits and their challenges and their problems, we will associate them with a negative narrative. But if we meet them in a different way through – their assets and their aspirations, then we think of them as a whole person and we associate them with the more, fuller narrative.
- Tina Rosenberg: We're not talking about changing the whole story, just the first paragraph. It's just about the first time you meet them. So for example, you would use language that doesn't refer to a young man as an at-risk youth. Instead, you would call him a student, right? He's also a student. You could introduce a young girl, not by talking about the fact that her parents are alcoholics and she's constantly got violence in her neighborhood, you can talk about her instead by saying, she's a B student and she participates in this club after school.
- Tina Rosenberg: I mean, just the way you meet someone is extremely important in setting the narrative. And by persisting, journalism has just persisted with this

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

Episode 40: The Power of Solutions Journalism

deficit frame, then we're setting ourselves up to be racially and socioeconomically discriminatory. We're creating a narrative that's a social injustice and that underlines every other social injustice. So we're working with newsrooms now to help change that.

Aza Raskin: So then to do my absolute favorite move always, which is to go meta, I'm curious what you can say about the impact of solutions journalism?

Hélène Biandudi Hofer: Sure. So, with Complicating the Narratives, what we are hearing from journalists and newsrooms is basically reminder of the basic tenets of good journalism, right? Listen differently. Listen at a deeper level. Ask questions that really get beneath the problem. Figure out ways to embrace complexity rather than just focusing on simplistic binary issues, portraying them in a binary way. And then countering confirmation bias. So we're talking about bias within ourselves, the audience, our sources.

Hélène Biandudi Hofer: So you take all those things and you put them together and that is Complicating the Narratives. And for journalists, it's really become a process change. This is changing how they process, the ways in which they do stories. So while we set out to do this, we're talking about polarization and division. What we're finding is that journalists are saying this expands beyond that. This impacts how we think about the job that we do, how we approach a story, how we frame it, how we think about sources. Who gets in the story, who doesn't. Right?

Hélène Biandudi Hofer: Is the audience, is the community accurately reflected? That's key. Very important. And then how am I really looking at my own assumptions as a journalist? In what ways are they showing up? In what ways might I be able to think about, taking this issue and constructing a story around it? And then engaging with the community to come together and kind of talk through that issue, right?

Hélène Biandudi Hofer: So contact theory. How can we put that into play and engage at a different level? So what we're seeing and learning is that yes, sure. The stories change. There's context. There's history. People are folding in solutions journalism. That also is a way to bring complexity and the stories that we're telling. But really it's shifting the mindset. So we hear from journalists, I do not approach storytelling the same way. And this is now reminding me of why I went into this field.

Tina Rosenberg: Yeah, there's a lot of burnout in journalism. And a lot of journalists find that Complicating the Narratives and solutions stories are a good antidote to that. But in terms of what the research says about the effects of solutions journalism, we have found, you can measure the effects on different levels. Internally in the newsroom, solutions journalism produces better engagement with your audience and more trust. People tend to think of a newsroom as a civic actor of importance and value if they do solutions journalism more than if they don't.

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

Episode 40: The Power of Solutions Journalism

- Tina Rosenberg: Journalists don't think of it this way, but civilians often do. Oh, you're just standing there sniping off to the side, when you're doing your stories about what's wrong. Tell us what we're doing that's working. People do want that and trust news more when it has that in it. That's one thing. Second of all, revenue. We have many, many partners that use it to raise money. Foundation grants, getting sponsorship. Businesses like to advertise against it and like to sponsor solution sections.
- Tina Rosenberg: Everyone wants to be associated with innovation and new ideas. It also can lead to more reader pay revenue for news organizations where a subscription or a membership model is your model. Then there's what is the impact does it have in the real world? And it's much harder to measure that. We have many case studies of impact where laws have been changed. Where programs have been taken from one place to another place. Where people have duplicated something that's gone on across the city, because of the solution stories. But it is very hard to measure that impact.
- Tina Rosenberg: It's hard to measure the impact of any journalism. But like investigative journalism, there is lots of anecdotal evidence that when you talk about a problem and talk about how people are solving it successfully, it does lead to change. We have, somebody we work with who's the opinion editor at the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. He found himself the only employee of the opinion section at the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. So he had to stop doing what opinion sections normally do, which is editorials and op-eds.
- Tina Rosenberg: He started doing solutions journalism instead. He does one-third the number of stories that they used to publish, but has nine times the readership. Solution stories are stories people spend more time with, engage with more deeply. You're more likely to subscribe to the newsletter. You're more likely to subscribe and become a member. If you're looking just at clicks, solution stories in some research studies do as well as traditional journalism. In some they do better and in some they do worse. It's equivocal. But what is absolutely true is engagement and engagement is the metric that matters.
- Aza Raskin: So I know that you guys have a database of solutions and solutions articles. I would love to hear you talk about that.
- Tina Rosenberg: Yeah, so the story tracker. At SJN, we don't do solutions journalism. I mean, I do with the 'Fixes' column, but that's separate. But we teach others do it and then we collect it. We have a team of people whose job it is to find these stories, to read them, to vet them, make sure they're good solutions journalism, to summarize them and tag them. Then we have them in this database where you can search for them in many, many, many different ways. We have, I think about 12,000 stories right now and we're adding more every day.

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

Episode 40: The Power of Solutions Journalism

- Tina Rosenberg: So if you're interested in mental health access for Spanish-speaking people in Colorado and you want to see videos that are more than five minutes long, you could put all those parameters in and find solutions stories. You can search for exactly the kind of story that you need. And it's a great tool, not only for journalists, but also for policy makers, for NGOs, for philanthropy. It's really a great tool.
- Tristan Harris: Imagine we had two choices between what 3 billion people receive in the Facebook newsfeed. And in one world, we have disempowering, learned helplessness journalism over and over and over again, bombarding people in the problem. And in the other hand, we could do an Indiana Jones swap find and replace, and we just had solutions journalism stories. So people are, for every single thing that they're encountering, they're hearing about another town that's been able to address that problem. For every problem.
- Tristan Harris: When I was thinking about this episode, I was thinking about, just as a thought experiment. Imagine you're sharing a story into any one of these social media products. And when it recognizes that you're doing it on one of these persistent mega problems – homelessness, criminal justice, racial justice, climate change – it noticed that, and it allowed you to tag on like it pulled from Solutions Journalism Network. It showed you which of these examples might you want to bolt on before you hit post. And you could be, co-creating a reality that's about an empowering relationship to that reality as opposed to one that is persistently disempowering and isolating, and I'm all in this by myself and repress all of that and go into denial, and all the psychological fallout that comes from that entire sort of burying process.
- Aza Raskin: That takes us from learned helplessness to learn to hopefulness, and then at societal scale from existential threat to existential hope.
- Tina Rosenberg: Yeah. We call it hope with teeth.
- Tristan Harris: That's an example of, I think marrying together, the work that you're doing with the work that we're doing. I would bet that it's a one day hackathon kind of effort for any engineer at a Twitter, at a Facebook, at a LinkedIn to integrate or even prototype a test or something like that. I mean, it's kind of one of those 10 lines of JavaScript code type things that is actually quite easy.
- Tristan Harris: I'm not saying that that's the one solution. I just mean that we're sitting here with solutions to this problem. And one of the things that's really difficult is you all are doing this hard work to make sure that there is a database of solutions so that it's more easily find-able, but we're not pulling in what we know into what we could do.

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

Episode 40: The Power of Solutions Journalism

- Tina Rosenberg: I would certainly want that kind of social media. And if anyone's an engineer who'd like to take on that problem, then that would be fantastic. We'd like to talk to you as soon as possible.
- Tristan Harris: Tina Rosenberg is a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and author. She's also a co-author of the 'Fixes' column in the New York Times. And her most recent book is *Joined the Club: How Peer Pressure Can Transform the World*. She's also co-founder of the Solutions Journalism Network.
- Tristan Harris: H  l  ne Biandudi Hofer is an award-winning journalist and producer who creates original solutions-oriented content for television, film and online platforms. Since we recorded our interview, she wrapped up her role as manager of the Complicating the Narratives initiative at SJN. You can find SJN story tracker, information about Complicating the Narratives, and more at solutionsjournalism.org.
- Tristan Harris: And Tina will be joining us for a live conversation and Q&A at our podcast club. Details are at humanetech.com.
- Tristan Harris: Your Undivided Attention is produced by the Center for Humane Technology, a nonprofit organization working to catalyze a humane future. Our Executive Producer is Stephanie Lepp. Our Senior Producer is Natalie Jones, and our associate producer is Noor Al-Samarrai. Dan Kedmey is our Editor-at-Large.
- Tristan Harris: Original music and sound design by Ryan and Hays Holladay. And a special thanks to the whole Center for Humane Technology team for making this podcast possible. You can find show notes, transcripts, and more at humanetech.com.
- Tristan Harris: A very special thanks goes to our generous lead supporters, including the Omidyar Network, Craig Newmark Philanthropies, and the Evolve Foundation, among many others. I'm Tristan Harris. And if you made it all the way here, let me just give one more thank you, to you, for getting us your undivided attention.