

## **Engaging Audiences with Local News: Can Solutions Journalism Be a Solution to Local Media Crisis?**

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This article explores whether the increasingly touted power of solutions-oriented news serves as a potential measure for local media to attract and engage audiences. We take one local outlet in a London district (Chiswick) as a case study and investigate the audience's evaluation of and engagement with two local solutions news stories during the pandemic to explore whether or not this type of journalism helps local media overcome the problem of disengagement with audiences. The findings, from in-depth interviews with 21 local news users, indicate that audiences judge local news based on their community experience and prior knowledge of local news outlets. In doing so, they may express a degree of skepticism about the positive tone of the solutions-oriented news in question. Their concerns can be explained in light of audience expectations of what Silverstone calls the "proper distance" between local journalists and their sponsors and sources. The general demand is that local news should stress its monitorial role, not a promotional one, even in small community contexts.

*Keywords: audience engagement, local news, solutions journalism, constructive journalism, proper distance*

Local journalism, defined as news practices that are "primarily oriented towards covering more circumscribed geographic areas than national and international media" (Nielsen, 2015, p. 35), plays a vital role in informing local communities about things that matter to them, connecting people to each other in their geographical community, scrutinizing those in power, representing communities to themselves and the larger public sphere, and advocating for communities on issues of public concern. There is still a clear

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consensus that local journalism correlates with functioning local democracies because more informed audiences usually mean more engagement in local decisions, especially during moments of crisis (Lavender et al., 2020). During the global pandemic, although the United Kingdom's news sector as a whole saw more than 2,000 staff lose their jobs due to the resulting decline in circulation and advertising, local news still recorded high online interest during its peak (Wahl-Jorgensen, Garcia-Blanco, & Boelle, 2022). Yet, it is well documented that local journalism is facing a challenging and uncertain time. The pandemic, while highlighting its importance, has brought this to a new level, and it remains difficult to predict how things will pan out for local journalism in the years ahead. Nonetheless, local journalism remains undertheorized, and our knowledge of the variations in local news consumption remains limited.

This article explores the increasingly touted power of solutions journalism as a potential measure for local media to attract and engage audiences. Solutions journalism is often linked to the social responsibility theory of news media as it engages readers in responding to social problems. McIntyre and Lough (2021) identify several qualities of solutions journalism, including the focus on social problems, a response to such issues, evidence of the impact and limitations of this response, and citing sources with expertise on the topic (p. 1562). A growing literature highlights how such journalism might instill more optimism and a positive attitude among audiences (McIntyre & Sobel, 2017), as well as a general feeling of empowerment and overall engagement with the news. In other words, solutions-oriented journalism is seen as a potential contributor to audiences' overall well-being and civic engagement, especially in a news environment dominated by negative, problems-focused news (Nguyen, Glück, & Jackson, 2022).

In contributing to existing literature, this study examines whether local audiences respond favorably to solutions-oriented news content on a small-town news site during an unprecedented crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, we take one local outlet, *Chiswick Calendar* (CC) in a London district (Chiswick) as a case study to investigate the audience's evaluation of and engagement with solutions-based local news during the pandemic. In examining CC's audience responses to pandemic solutions news, this study goes a step further from previous local news research, which tends to highlight audience fragmentation, to explore the underrepresented topic of the audience's shared experiences in a local community (Gulyás, O'Hara, & Eilenberg, 2018).

### **Local News, Local Democracy**

Journalism is traditionally regarded as synonymous with the public good in realizing the democratic goal of civic participation, informing the public, and scrutinizing those in power (Finneman & Thomas, 2021). Local news has been attributed to promoting citizen participation, collective community identity, scrutinizing local political elites, and raising awareness about local issues (Jerónimo, Correia, & Gradim, 2020; Lewis, Holton, & Coddington, 2014). Local news can refer to news in major cities or small towns (Örnebring, Kingsepp, & Möller, 2020). Local media tend to serve a well-defined geographical community while helping to build social capital (Bowd, 2017). Like national and international news outlets, most local media are run as commercial, for-profit enterprises. However, they are still expected to play a vital role in their local communities' sociodemocratic life (Lavender et al., 2020; Matthews, 2020).

Local journalism has faced many formidable challenges, such as staff cuts in local newsrooms and the replacing of traditional journalism with public relations work due to the increasing financial pressures on local newspapers (Lavender et al., 2020). Local outlets may be unable to attract and maintain a pool of qualified journalists, leading to some outlets being passive publishers of press releases by local authorities (O'Neill & O'Connor, 2008). Another disturbing trend is the reduction in the plurality of voices and sources, with local outlets increasingly citing one source, thereby undermining the watchdog role of local journalism. More recently, a study on seven local communities in the United Kingdom (Barclay, Barnett, Moore, & Townend, 2022) has shown that local media are no longer regarded as the community glue that preserves a community's collective identity, and local government is hardly scrutinized in local media. As such, local media are regarded as a platform to publish press releases with little scrutiny. It is worth mentioning that the British regional press is mainly dominated by a few publishing groups (O'Hara, 2020) and that the number of local newspapers has declined since 2017 (Media Reform Coalition, 2019). Until recent years, 57% of the UK population was still not served by any local newspaper (Ramsay, Freedman, Jackson, & Thorsen, 2017), and as of 2021, three companies controlled 70% of local news circulation in the United Kingdom (Media Reform Coalition, 2021). There are a few independent titles that serve small communities, but they usually face tremendous financial pressures.

Chief among the many challenges facing local journalism are the traditional business structures with much dependence on advertising, especially given the declining subscriptions to local outlets and the audience's general reluctance to pay for the news. This trend has been accelerated by the increasing digitalization and the consequent availability of free online news and information. Although several outlets have expanded their digital outreach, they still have difficulty reaching young audiences (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018). In response, local media tend to adopt new business models to attract audiences, and subsequently advertisers, through clickbait activities or to team up with certain commercial brands to develop new services. As such, some citizens have come to perceive local media as concerned primarily with clickbait rather than information and debate (Barclay et al., 2022). The most oft-cited reason for following local news is that it provides specific information about local events and activities. In other words, the main motive is instrumental rather than incidental or habitual (see Gulyás et al., 2018). Moreover, audiences tend to perceive local news as less objective than previously, mainly when covering local councils' activities and providing a much-diminished diversity of voices and sources (Ross, Lester, & Konkes, 2021). Generally, local journalists are often accused of being disconnected from rather than engaging with the audiences they serve (McCollough, Crowell, & Napoli, 2016). Other studies (e.g., Fisher, Flew, Park, Lee, & Dulleck, 2021) point to the declining trust in media, which has become more acute post-COVID, given the need for reliable information.

The trust in local journalism would be a first casualty if the "proper distance" between local journalists and their sponsors and sources, a concept espoused by Silverstone (2006), is not evident to audiences. "Proper distance" is characterized by its aim to involve the audience in creating meaning out of media messages to create proximity between the audience and those suffering from a particular problem without necessarily getting too close to distress (Ananny, 2015; Matthiesen, 2019; Wright, 2011). In this sense, getting closer is not always desirable; instead, journalists need to maintain a proper distance from the issues and groups they cover. Moreover, this proper distance encompasses deliberation as a result of providing enough contextualization of the issues covered in the news, leading ultimately to the audience's active response to this knowledge (Wright, 2011). Thus, proximity to local issues risks blurring the

boundaries between journalists' monitorial role and their role as witnesses of local settings as they express their personal views. In so doing, journalists may jeopardize their proper distance, which inevitably requires boundaries (Ananny, 2015).

Local news leaders around Europe, facing these immense challenges, have made efforts to shift their strategic focus from maximizing audience reach that can be instantly monetized through advertising to building loyal audience engagement through quality content that can be turned into subscription revenues (Jenkins, 2020). One common recommendation for local journalists is to adopt more solutions-oriented content to attract and engage more audiences (Jenkins, 2020; Usery, 2022). This is to balance their role as local information providers and their occupational tendency to focus on overly negative, problem-based news. Solutions-oriented news is arguably much needed during crises such as the pandemic when audiences need news that can help mitigate their worries, fears, and anxieties (Nguyen et al., 2022; Niblock, 2020). Experimentation with solutions journalism in France and Germany has produced some encouraging results (Jenkins, 2020), but much more research is needed to understand whether it could be a viable save for the long-simmering crisis of local journalism. This study aims to address this by exploring audience responses to local solutions journalism to see whether it can help local media overcome or mitigate the problem of audience disengagement in the context of a major "glocal" (global and local) crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Solutions Journalism and Audience (Dis)engagement**

The pandemic provided a challenge to media outlets in terms of audience engagement, partly due to the excessive increase in negative news contributing to a general feeling of fatigue, anger, and anxiety and, consequently, a marked rise in news avoidance (Nguyen et al., 2022). Indeed, news avoidance has become a significant issue post-COVID, with the proportion of audiences who say they consume less news or avoid it altogether having doubled in the United Kingdom (Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, Eddy, & Nielsen, 2022), particularly among the young and less educated sectors.

It is here that solutions journalism is said to play a role in addressing challenges and helping audiences engage with the news to cope with crises such as the pandemic. As a form of constructive journalism that aims to address the negativity bias in news selection and mediation, solutions journalism endeavors to present a balanced and contextualized view of both problems and solutions (Haagerup, 2017), and in doing so, it shifts the news frame from a traditionally excessive focus on problems to solutions to problems (McIntyre & Gibson, 2016). Solutions journalism should not be mistaken as selecting facts to paint a positive picture of something for promotional or propaganda purposes: It is about rigorously reporting and framing facts in contexts to highlight not only problems but also how people and organizations respond to problems (McIntyre & Lough, 2021). There are five key elements to solutions journalism: highlighting a problem and its underlying causes, spotlighting possible solutions, providing details on how to implement these solutions, reporting on the outcomes of implementing these measures, and offering insights into the lessons learned for the future (Murray & Stroud, 2019). By paying more attention to constructive dimensions of events, situations, and people, such journalism has been seen as a way to counter journalists' occupational bias toward negativity (McIntyre & Gibson, 2016).

Solutions journalism has been proposed as one pivotal means to tackle audience disengagement, which has been attributed substantially, although not entirely, to the abundance of negative news (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018, p. 24; Zhao, Jackson, & Nguyen, 2022). Studies indicate that solutions journalism could engender more trust in the news (Abdenour, McIntyre, & Dahmen, 2020; Lough & McIntyre, 2021), mitigate the adverse effects of problem-based news (McIntyre, 2017, 2020), and inspire people to act. Although solutions journalism does not always embody positive outcomes (e.g., when it analyses unsuccessful solutions), its overall aim is to make audiences less anxious and more inspired than traditional problems-focused news (McIntyre, 2017, 2020). Further evidence of positive effects was found during the pandemic, with news focusing on recovery solutions (Schäfer, Greber, Sülflow, & Lecheler, 2022). A recent study (Zhao et al., 2022) finds that the pandemic news audience generally perceives solutions journalism as a form of psychological empowerment that increases their awareness while motivating them to cope with the global pandemic. A survey of more than 2,000 UK adults in 2021 shows overwhelming support for solutions news as a potential resource for local communities to build hope to recover from the pandemic (Nguyen et al., 2022). However, it should be noted, as Overgaard (2021) finds, that positive pandemic information without a specific solution had the same effect as positive information with a solution.

Solutions journalism has gained much attention in the industry, albeit with mixed responses from news professionals. Recent years have seen some newsrooms—including big names such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, BBC, *Guardian*, and *Times*—shifting to more solutions-oriented journalism (Schäfer, Greber, Sülflow, & Lecheler, 2022; van Antwerpen, Searston, Turnbull, Hermans, & Kovacevic, 2022). Many have met with considerable successes in engaging audiences and enhancing their trust in the news, as evidenced by the rise of positive audience feedback to solution stories and, indirectly, by an increased subscription rate to those publishing them (Jenkins, 2020). In contrast, some journalists are skeptical of solutions journalism because it may be associated with activism and thus negate the role of the journalist as a detached observer (Hermans & Drok, 2018, p. 687). Abdenour et al. (2020) show that U.S. citizens' trust in news is connected to their views on other things than just the negativity/positivity issue, especially journalistic adversarial roles, indicating that those who believe journalists should challenge authority are more likely to trust the news media. Moreover, the existing literature is not yet conclusive about the positive effects of such news on audience engagement and whether audiences may feel that solutions journalism lacks credibility as it serves as subliminal advertising (Schäfer et al., 2022).

This study aims to explore local audiences' response to solutions-oriented local news, focusing on one district in London, by probing their perception of such news during the pandemic and their perception of whether this type of journalism will bolster their general engagement with local news. It asks whether, and why, solutions journalism can or cannot improve audience engagement, or at least mitigate audience disengagement, with local media, especially in times of abundant problems-focused news like the pandemic. This study builds on Abdenour et al. (2020) and focuses on the audience's expectation of local solutions journalism and its connection to adversarial and monitorial roles, as discussed later.

### **Method**

To address this question, we designed a qualitative, exploratory study based on in-depth interviews with participants in a local neighborhood. The qualitative approach was chosen to provide in-depth

explanations behind the audience's preference, experience, and level of engagement with solutions-based local news during the pandemic (see also Gulyás et al., 2018; Wenzel, 2018).

The research took place in London, which has 34 boroughs or local authorities, and zoomed in on a local news outlet in the Chiswick area, which comprises Turnham Green, Chiswick Riverside, and Chiswick Homefields wards. Chiswick is part of the Hounslow borough and is the smallest of the five areas of the borough. The area records high levels of civic participation and has a high number of third-sector organizations (*Chiswick area profile*, n.d.). To recruit as diverse a group as possible, we used multiple methods: we posted adverts on CC and Chiswick W4 websites, which were the main recruitment channels. We also attempted to recruit participants in person and in public places in Chiswick. The sample included those who registered on CC's website and expressed interest in participating in this research. In total, the research team recruited 21 participants, of which 16 live in the heart of Chiswick, and the remaining five live on the outskirts of Chiswick. All participants registered their details, including age, gender, educational background, income level, and level of engagement with local news. However, we did not ask participants about their ideological leanings. All participants were given consent forms to confirm their willingness to participate in this research. Each participant was offered a £20 voucher as an incentive to take part in this project. The data was collected between April and July 2022.

In terms of gender, there were five identified as men and 16 as women. The fact that more female than male residents volunteered to join the research indicates a potential difference in local engagement between genders. For instance, the UK social capital survey (Office for National Statistics, 2021) suggests a high social capital among the female population, who tend to be more involved in local networks than their male counterparts. During the peak of the pandemic, female residents reported stronger social connections in their local communities (73.6%) than male residents (65.5%), and such social support networks tend to increase with age (Office for National Statistics, 2021).

In terms of demographics, Chiswick has a high proportion of people of white ethnicity and is generally considered an affluent neighborhood (Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion, 2020), although it forms part of Hounslow Council, which also comprises less privileged wards. Our sample reflected this demographic diversity, with three participants stating their belonging to ethnic minority groups, corresponding to 14.6%, which is above the national average of 13.8% (Diversity UK (n.d.)). Three participants were aged between 21 and 40, nine were between 41 and 60, and another nine were 61 or older. Most participants (about 80%) held undergraduate or postgraduate degrees, indicating a potentially high level of media literacy.

All participants, regardless of age, confirmed their access to the news online or through various news apps. This is unsurprising given the fact that Chiswick's residents are classified as either e-professionals (well-educated, young, and experienced users with high levels of Internet engagement) or e-veterans who are middle-aged professionals recording the second-highest levels of Internet access at work after the e-professionals (Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion, 2020). This is consistent with recent research indicating that nearly 50% of British adults access local news on social media platforms (Gulyás et al., 2018) and that social media are generally dominant in local news and information (e.g., Barclay et al., 2022).

Contrary to most community news outlets, which are dominated by male editors and reporters (Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2022), the local outlet that we studied, CC, was launched and managed by a female editor. CC defines itself as a "community interest company." It has a website with a "what's on" guide to local events, and it publishes news and features about Chiswick. CC operates a club card scheme that promotes local businesses by offering discounts for participating restaurants and other shops. In addition to its website, CC has a weekly newsletter sent to subscribers who are also entitled to a free club card. CC hosts a media club featuring debates about current affairs. CC is owned and edited by a former BBC journalist, who is also a founder and director of the Chiswick Flower Market and as such is involved in local initiatives and known to local news users.

CC participated in an action research program that trained and mentored about 70 journalists from more than 50 local news titles in the United Kingdom to produce solutions journalism for pandemic recovery during 2021–2022. For this study, all news stories published on CC during the training period were passed on to trainers and consultants from the Solutions Journalism Network (SJN) for vetting. On that basis, we chose two stories with the highest scores as stimulus materials for our in-depth interviews:

The first (Osborne, 2022) was about a local flower market launched in September 2020 (amid the pandemic) that had since been open once a month, despite pandemic restrictions. The content of the story was primarily about the flower market as a resilient response to the multiple challenges of running a local market under pandemic restrictions, encouraging different types of flower traders to participate and mitigating the unsustainable use of plastic planting pots. On vetting it, our consultants from the SJN gave it 10 of 10 on the grounds that it hits their four pillars of solutions journalism, namely response, insight, evidence, and limitations. In particular, it was praised for illustrating the process behind the flower market, its success, and its limitations.

The second story (Smith, 2021) was a solutions-oriented news report on a £20 voucher scheme launched by Hounslow Council using a financial package from the government to help mitigate the economic consequences of COVID-19 on local businesses. The council used the scheme to offer each household a £20 voucher to be spent in local independent stores, but not big chain stores, to bring customers to post-lockdown local shops. Our SJN consultants gave it 8.5 of 10 on the grounds that the storytelling, although not as strong as the other one, contains all the four aforementioned pillars.

We note here that we did not agree entirely with the assessment of these stories by our SJN partners. In fact, despite its focus on the flower market as a response to multiple challenges, we would not treat the first story as a perfect, 10-out-of-10 solutions news piece because, as its headline suggests, it was framed more as a positive, feel-good story of pandemic resilience than a solutions-oriented one. However, because SJN standards were used for the training and mentoring that led to these stories, and because the body of the story was structured primarily along several solutions-oriented sections, we decided to accept these scores for consistency in our research instruments, both for this and other studies produced from this project.

Interviews were conducted digitally, recorded, and transcribed, except for one case over the phone. The interviewees were sent the two stories for reading in advance. During the interviews, they were probed for responses about their general engagement with local news in general and their specific reaction to each

of the selected news stories. In some cases, the moderator would share the news story on the screen to discuss or retrieve specific examples pointed out by the interviewee about each news story. In addition to eliciting participants' perception of the approach taken in these two examples, particularly how they address how struggling local businesses were reinvigorated during the pandemic, we also probed for their general evaluation of solutions journalism.

All interviews were coded using NVivo to explore themes across all interviews. The analysis proceeded in several steps, beginning with data familiarization, coding the data into themes and subthemes, including checking for new emergent themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

### **Findings**

Most participants agreed that news during the peak of the pandemic was overly negative, pushing a few of them to avoid the news. "It became much more doomscrolling . . . to the point where I just couldn't watch it anymore," said one participant (1). Another participant (14) felt the news was so negative during the peak of the pandemic, while she was pregnant, to the extent that she felt the need to avoid negative news and searched instead for only positive and upbeat news. The abundance of negative news also prompted another participant (21) to become more skeptical of news sources: "I wanted to build my own judgment of the risks, the spread, and so on. It moved more from being news and more a sort of data collection and trying to find trusted and useful sources of data." This is in line with previous research into the effects of pandemic news consumption on mental health and psychological well-being (Nielsen, Kalogeropoulos, & Fletcher, 2020). Despite all the fatigue and frustration with the predominance of news about pandemic problems, the two solutions-oriented stories that we presented to participants did not seem to strike them in a favorable way.

#### ***"It's Not Journalism"—Critical Questioning of Behind-the-Scene Issues and Motives***

When they were presented with the "feel-good" story about the flower market being set up in their local community during the pandemic, several participants were skeptical of the overly positive tone of the story and the purpose it serves. For one, "it seemed a bit more of a fluff article" (Participant 4). For another, it is an attempt to "instill a positive feeling" toward the flower market rather than news:

If I thought of it as a bit of branding for their flower market, I think it's very well done. . . . It's not journalism . . . I think that the challenge with a lot of local news is how do you hook people? Pieces like this, how do you get people interested? How do you get them to read it? (Participant 21)

In most cases, participants were keen to highlight and question the "positive spin" in the story. There was a general perception that the story might have been based on a press release circulated by the organizers of the flower market. One even noted that the editor of CC was among the organizers of the market herself: "The flower market was a press release from the people who ran the flower market . . . I

know a lot because I'm local, the editor was involved with the flower market, she was on the committee and did all that" (Participant 15).<sup>2</sup>

The lack of context (or references to problems on the ground when preparing for the flower market) was also highlighted by some participants. For example, one questioned the missing information about the competition the flower market has created for existing garden centers: "It competes with wheelers, gardens, and flower centers. One has two stores on the High Road opposite where the market is. They have no Monday business as a result of flower markets on Sundays" (Participant 19).

Other participants pointed to the lack of information about health concerns in relation to the flower market. Participant 3 found it to be "pretty irresponsible" and was "somewhat antipathetic" to see the flower market set up in the midst of the pandemic because "even though it was outdoors, there was no social distancing that I could see going on at all." The skepticism about the flower market story was also justified by the lack of details about the difficulties encountered when the market was set up and the fact that it was not particularly welcomed by all residents:

They [CC] don't mention that [the market organizers] had to overcome local resistance. . . . You want to hear they had to overcome enormous difficulties with the council. They had to suspend all the parking bays where the old original street market was, in the Old Market Place. (Participant 1)

These extracts indicate that the audience held a high level of skepticism of this story, drawing on their specific knowledge of the challenges surrounding the flower market. The skepticism in the overall assessment of this story was particularly voiced among the several participants who perceived, correctly or not, that the CC's editor might have had a conflict of interest.

### ***More Like a Positive Spin? Concerns Around the Solution's Rationale and Context***

For similar reasons, when probed about their view on whether the second story on the local shopping voucher could be constructive for post-lockdown community life, most participants (15) expressed serious misgivings about the rationale of seeing it as constructive. Many agreed that it lacked context about the real problems and that the story instead attempted to highlight the positive aspects only. Although most expressed willingness to support their local businesses, they did not see the £20 voucher scheme flagged in the selected news story as a potential solution. They were particularly critical of this story's lack of depth and context. As one observed, "Here you see the shop's opinion . . . but perhaps not so much on the cons, only on the cons from the shop's point of view" (Participant 10). On being introduced to the concept of solutions journalism, several participants expressed reservations about evaluating this story as solutions journalism. Participant 8 commented that "there's a clear diagnosis of a problem, and the solution isn't really fit for purpose," whereas for Participant 18, the solution was not contextualized enough as to why it

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<sup>2</sup> We are not able to ascertain whether the editor was actually involved in the flower market's organization. We use these statements purely as qualitative research data representing the thoughts and beliefs of our interviewees.

was needed. Some pointed out the article's absence of consumers' and residents' voices as a sign of a positive spin. For instance, Participant 7, noting that the story does not include interviews with any shopper under the scheme, said, "It was just all very one-dimensional. It wasn't rich. It wasn't deep." Others questioned the rationale of the reported support scheme from the perspective of tax-paying citizens. Participant 10 asked whether it would be better that "we taxpayers . . . give the money directly to the shops," and Participant 20 was blunter, labeling it as "just a waste of money" and questioning "who made that decision to give everybody £20." Another was in the same sentiment and opinion: "I just think it was a very strange thing for a London borough to do at a time when it's short of money" (Participant 3).

Further, as the news story highlighted selected local stores in the neighborhood, participants felt a blurred distance between the CC writer and business sponsors. Therefore, they assessed this story as a promotional piece, aiming to raise the profile of certain local stores at the expense of others. One "was very cynical" and thought of it merely as a promotion opportunity for the four or five cited business owners in the story (Participant 3). Another called them "like little sound bites . . . feeling like paid promotions" (Participant 1). One "got bored" because "it was almost like the below-the-line comments piece from all of the shops" (Participant 5). The questions asked are echoed in this comment from Participant 14: "Did they just pick them randomly or did those businesses lobby, or were these businesses sponsors of the *Chiswick Calendar* or something like that?"

There was evidence that such editorial treatment would cause distrust or disrespect for journalists. "I would have respected the journalist more had there been much more discussion about the benefits and the context in which the scheme was done rather than simply appearing to promote the businesses," said Participant 3. Despite harboring doubts, our participants still turned to CC as a source of information, which suggests that their doubts may stem from the lack of transparency regarding the funding received by CC to promote specific businesses in the area. In short, despite the dwindling resources available to local news, the data indicate the audience's rejection of the confluence of advertising and local news and a preference for the monitorial role of journalists (Fielding, 2022) and for journalists to maintain a proper distance to advertisers.

### **Discussion: The Importance of "Proper Distance"**

When we started the project from which this article was generated, the expectation was that solutions-oriented journalism, as a form of constructive reporting, could serve as a potential resource for local communities to build resilience and to feel inspired and/or empowered in their recovery from pandemic destructions. The findings show that news audiences do not necessarily share our appreciation of solutions-oriented news in a small local context. Despite their fatigue with negative pandemic news, participants were highly skeptical of the two solutions-oriented stories presented to them.

As a potential interpretation, such attitudes might be part of the growing phenomenon of "generalized skepticism," that is, the trend for news users to question all forms of news selection, whether by human or robotic editors (Ross Arguedas, Badrinathan, Mont'Alverne, Fletcher, & Nielsen, 2022). If understood that way, skepticism about the two stories would reflect a somewhat generalized skepticism about CC as a news outlet. However, on closer inspection, we did not see the case for that argument. Our interviewees, all of whom subscribed to CC's newsletter, and the majority of whom joined this study through

CC's call for participation, generally saw it as a trusted, essential local information source. This suggests that the pervasive skepticism over the stories in question is more specific to themselves than CC as a news title. Particularly, it is due to a perception of a possible skewed coverage of the topics and the perceived lack of transparency about the funding that CC might have received to promote certain business initiatives in the neighborhood. In fact, our audience members are "critical news evaluators" (Thorbjørnsrud & Ustad Figenschou, 2022, p. 1031) who judge such news based on their community experience and prior knowledge of local news outlets. Much skepticism about the flower market emerged from prior knowledge of the involvement of the CC's editor in the local committee coordinating the market. This might or might not be true, but it explains participants' concerns about both the lack of contextualization and the motives behind the selected stories.

Such skepticism presents a professional challenge for journalists who want to produce solutions journalism for local communities. Unlike national journalists, local journalists are inevitably close to and under the close watch of their communities, often because they are members of the same communities (Franklin, 2006). Reporting solutions to local problems is worthwhile, but journalists must tread carefully to avoid being seen as promoters or advocates. Our interviewees' responses to the flower market and the £20 voucher stories indicate the need for local journalists to distance themselves from their local sponsors and whatever risks associated with not doing it. The absence of an evaluative dimension or neutral language about strengths and weaknesses could lead local news users to use their direct experience to cast doubts on the reported positive solution. It is worth noting that more of our participants are in the older age brackets who are more attached to the importance of impartiality in the news (Robertson, 2021).

Our participants' skepticism, in that light, can be explained in terms of the aforementioned "proper distance" between local journalists and their sources. This distancing issue was raised by Participant 19, who reported her tendency to check whether local businesses mentioned in the CC were members of its club card scheme. Several participants assess their local news outlets as less objective than national news brands like the BBC. This aligns with recent research that finds local news outlets are often criticized for catering to their advertisers and local elites rather than their audience, perhaps because they are historically tied to the political and economic elites (Ross et al., 2021). In this study, the audience perceives the articles as indicating an advocacy role in which the local outlet uses selective interpretations through a personal style of reporting, which in turn may weaken its watchdog role (see Mellado, 2015). They were also critical of the reliance on official sources in local journalism, as one observed: "Local newspapers are not delivering, they've just regurgitated press releases from the local council that say how great everything is" (Participant 5).

It is important to note that our participants do not demand their local journalists completely detach from the sources, as some see it as a risk for journalists to become too detached from the community. Rather, they seem to want journalists to be neither too close to nor too far from the people or issues they cover—that is, to maintain a proper distance. In fact, this demand for proper distance was also reflected in other data of this study. For instance, when asked about their views of CC, our participants commented differently on the conversational and opinionated nature of its editor. For some, such writing style does make CC feel "neighborly": "Actually, that reporting is very interesting because it is a lot more partisan, and you can read that" (Participant 20).

But for many others, it is too much in contrast to their perception of detached news: "If you read editorials in the broadsheets, the editorial tends to be from a fairly objective point of view, but [the CC editor] tends to be very subjective, which I'm not sure looks that professional" (Participant 1).

It is unclear whether such a personal form of writing would discourage or encourage local users from financially supporting CC, but only one participant declared that he donated a monthly amount to support CC (Participant 3).

Returning to solutions journalism practice and constructive journalism in general, the findings suggest that although it has made inroads in many newsrooms, cultural contexts and differences may influence the audience's acceptance of this form of practice. This is well in line with previous research. For instance, Danish audiences may be more open to the role of constructive journalists as mediators and moderators in public debates, whereas German audiences may be skeptical of such a role, casting doubt on the credibility of a constructive approach (Rusch, Simon, Otto, & Flintz, 2022). In our UK data, local audiences may be skeptical of such journalism because they express more appreciation of proper distance in local journalism (Meijer, 2022; Wojdowski, 2016). This was particularly the case when the shopping voucher story selected local stores, making some participants suspicious that it might be a form of native advertising or an undeclared blend of commercial and editorial content. This may explain their defensive processing and heightened scrutiny of this article, given the possible financial incentive for CC to highlight certain local stores. One means to highlight local news' proper distance is to ensure transparency in their reporting, such as adding a box explaining the rationale for selecting the sources and the ethical decisions made herein (Trusting News, 2023).

### **Conclusion**

This study makes a noteworthy contribution to the limited literature on audience engagement with local news, especially local solutions-oriented news in a negative problems-focused news environment. Before getting into that, however, several limitations need to be acknowledged here. First, the sample is in no way representative of the local news audience in the United Kingdom. As we restricted the participants to those living in one affluent London borough, we cannot generalize the results to the wider UK population. This is especially important in the context that our sample included more females than males and more people in older age groups and with higher levels of education. Future studies could stratify several neighborhoods representing diverse audience groups. Second, the selection of only two stories from one single local outlet would have limited the range of perspectives that we collected from our interviews. Third, as noted, the story evaluation by SJN—which was used as an instrument in this study—might not be in accordance with the ideal standards of solutions journalism often described in academic research and indeed promoted by SJN itself.

Nevertheless, the earlier critical and skeptical responses to solutions-oriented news call into question journalism scholars' assumption of audiences as purely rational actors who, despite the tendency to base decisions on an unconscious bias (Kahneman, 2011), would seek reliable information before deliberating a political decision (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). Our findings emphasize the need to assess the audience's perception of news, local news in this case, not only through their position as rational actors but

also through their emotional and preexisting ideas and beliefs. Such ideas include social clues from others in the local community and information about sources of advertising or sponsorship, which can all lead to declining trust in local news as well as an increasing tendency for audiences to formulate snap judgments about the quality of the information provided (Ross Arguedas et al., 2022). In our study, the audience seems to rely more on their prior experience in assessing news stories than on the effect of fatigue from ongoing coverage of COVID-19 destructions (Gurr, 2022). More particularly, our participants relied on their background knowledge of and existing feelings toward the CC to interpret its coverage of COVID-19 resilience and recovery. They were skeptical and highly critical despite the positive framing of the selected stories aiming to attract their attention and increase their engagement in a time of abundant negative news. This points to the paradox that such news may make audiences less engaged with local news and wary of the objectivity of local journalism.

The study also indicates a potential divergence between the audience's perception of solutions journalism and that of its practitioners (Mast & Coesemans, 2019). Among journalists, while there is no consensus on whether this journalism practice should be geared toward an advocacy role, many prefer to push it for societal change by generating positive energy (McIntyre & Lough, 2021), especially in local news. But this study indicates that the audience's expectation of local news centers around the norms of accuracy, objectivity, and a watchdog role (Poindexter, Heider, & McCombs, 2006) rather than that of positivity. Participants emphasized the value of journalism in providing possible solutions as long as it is in context and from diverse perspectives. But they also overtly question the function of news in generating positive emotions. The general expectation is that local news should serve a monitorial role of observing and reporting on local events accurately and objectively. This watchdog role was more prominent in the present study than the constructive role of providing solutions to local issues (Aitamurto & Varma, 2018). This does not have to translate into news avoidance: even the most skeptical participants tend to follow diverse news topics and sources (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003), especially during moments of crisis. Rather, this study reiterates this instrumental function of detached news in small communities like the Chiswick area in London. It is important to note that this study does not negate the positive effects of solutions journalism that previous research has found on audiences. However, it argues somewhat against the dichotomy of bad news/good news and its implications for audience engagement with news (Klein, 2003). For the participants in this study, good journalism is first and foremost about presenting events and issues—positive or negative, constructive or destructive—in a comprehensive, proportionate, and accurate manner. As local media continue efforts to redefine how they tell stories and (re)connect with audiences, that should remain the utmost principle and be done with a proper distance from sources and sponsors.

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