



Implementing Solutions Journalism

**A guide to putting solutions approaches
into practice for reporters and editors**



Introduction

Solutions Journalism is a rigorous and evidence-based approach to covering social issues that has been used to improve coverage of climate change, race relations, environmental management, social inclusion, and much more.

Research has found that news organisations that engage in solutions reporting have better levels of audience engagement, enjoy greater trust, and can tackle ‘bad news fatigue’.

This guide summarises six webinars delivered by the Walkley Foundation in partnership with the Solutions Journalism Network.

It will help you and your newsroom experiment with solutions approaches to journalism, navigate potential challenges, and leverage the opportunities it presents to forge closer relationships with audiences and boost revenue.

Access the full course, including webinar recordings, slide decks and reading lists: <https://www.walkleys.com/professional-development/solutions-journalism/>

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Table of Contents

Contents

1

Learn the fundamentals of solutions journalism

2

Solutions Story Checklist

3

Making the business case for solutions journalism

4

Using solutions journalism to strengthen audience and community relationships

5

Using solutions journalism to cover diverse communities

6

Building solutions journalism into newsroom practice

7

Defining and measuring impact for news

Learn the Fundamentals of Solutions Journalism

What makes a story a “solutions” story?

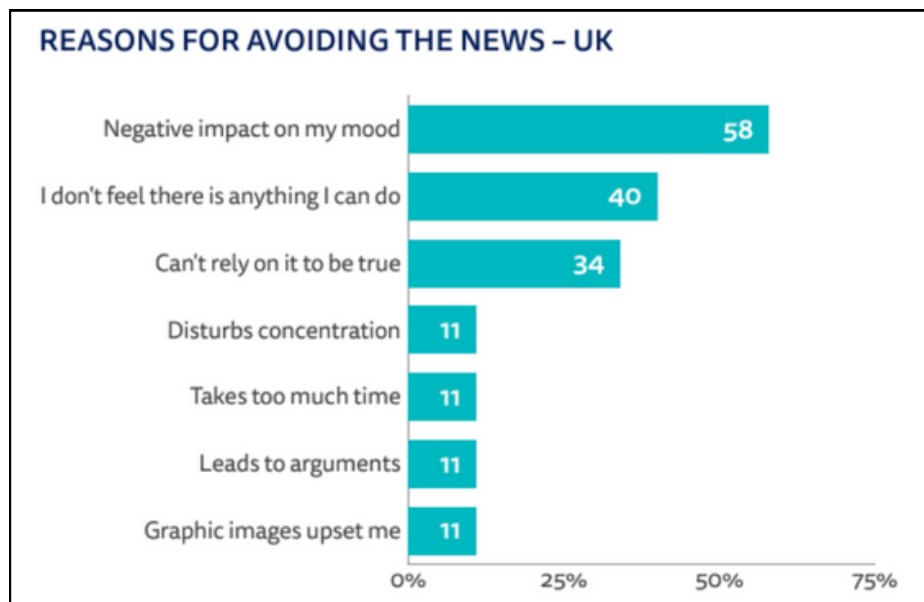
Solutions approaches require rigorous, evidence-based reporting on responses to social problems. This prevents a story from being:

- Hero worship
- Public relations or activism
- Advocacy for a particular approach (a “silver bullet”)
- Positive or quirky upbeat news
- A story about an idea or theory.

Why do Solutions Journalism?

1. Combat ‘bad news fatigue’ and news avoidance:

We know audiences are avoiding news. Two common reasons are to protect their mental health, and the inability to do anything about negative situations, as noted in the [Reuters Institute Digital News Report in 2019](#):

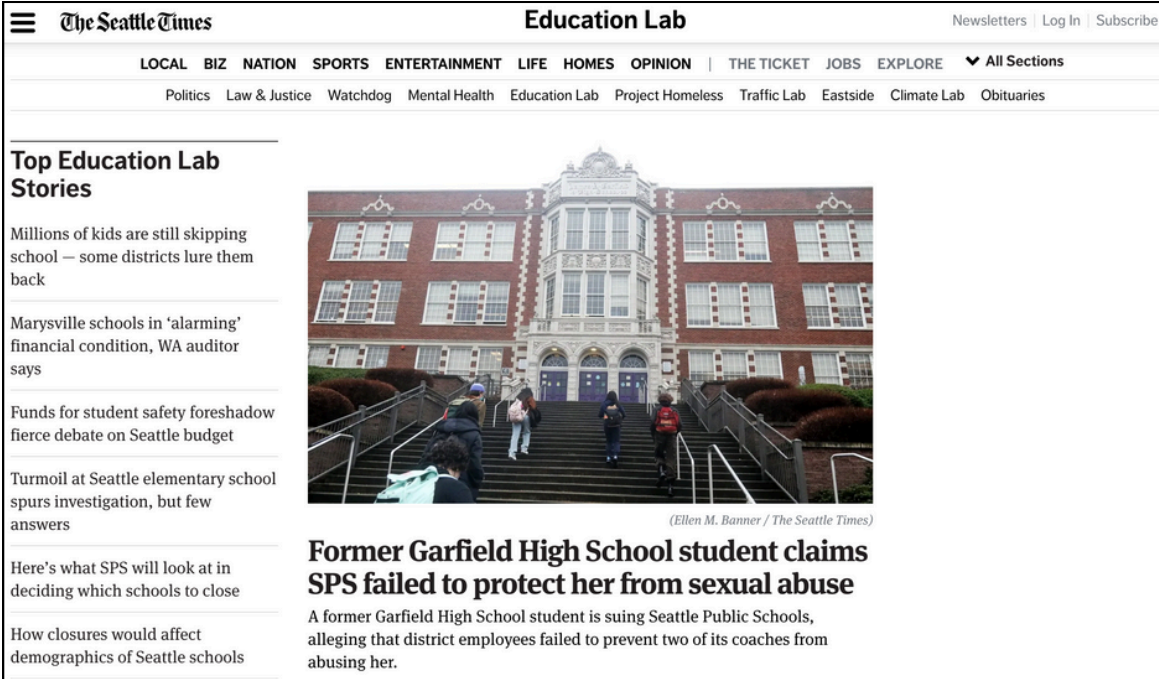


Solutions Journalism can be seen as covering the other half of the news - not just the problems that people face, but how people are solving those problems.

2. Boost Audience Engagement:

A [study of The Seattle Times: Education Lab](#) by the American Press Institute found:

- 62% of readers felt the coverage changed how they think about the issue
- 50% of parents and 84% of educators said they would share the information with others
- The stories had 102% more page views and 180% more time on the page compared to traditional education coverage by the Seattle Times
- The stories were 230% more likely to be shared on social media
- The user return rate to the Education Lab stories was 64%
- These statistics helped the Times attract new sponsorship from Alaska Airlines
- The project has now been followed by a new project, [Traffic Lab](#) - also sponsored by Alaska Airlines



The screenshot shows the 'Education Lab' section of The Seattle Times website. The page features a navigation bar with categories like LOCAL, BIZ, NATION, SPORTS, ENTERTAINMENT, LIFE, HOMES, OPINION, THE TICKET, JOBS, EXPLORE, and All Sections. Below the navigation, there are several article teasers under the heading 'Top Education Lab Stories'. The main featured article is titled 'Former Garfield High School student claims SPS failed to protect her from sexual abuse'. The article text states: 'A former Garfield High School student is suing Seattle Public Schools, alleging that district employees failed to prevent two of its coaches from abusing her.' The article is accompanied by a photograph of a large, ornate brick building, likely Garfield High School, with people walking on the steps. The photo is credited to Ellen M. Banner / The Seattle Times.

The FOUR ELEMENTS that make a story a 'solutions' story:

1. Explains a **RESPONSE** to a social problem
 - The response must be something people are already trying out.
 - What is it, and how does it work?
2. Provides **EVIDENCE**
 - What is the effectiveness of this response? How effective is it?
 - Where possible, provide data (quantitative) or anecdotal evidence (qualitative)
3. Offers **INSIGHTS**
 - Include enough information for your audience to decide if this response might be used to solve the same or similar problem they face
4. Explains **LIMITATIONS**
 - What are the limitations of this response (for example, does it only work in developed countries? Does it only work in small towns?)
 - What are the unknowns about this response?

Getting started with your first solutions story

- Identify an issue or problem of concern for your audience
- Conduct traditional news journalism to strengthen awareness of the **PROBLEM**
- Begin looking for **RESPONSES** to the problem
- Apply the **4-pillar approach** to producing your story
 - What's the response?
 - How effective is it - and what's the evidence?
 - What insights would you need to know to try this response elsewhere?
 - What are the limitations / unknowns about this response?

Involve the audience to help you find story ideas

- Canvass for **problems** - what are the most pressing issues facing you / your community?
- Canvass for **responses** - who's doing something about this issue?
- Use your journalism to identify the **evidence** and **limitations** of the response, and ask interviewees for **insights** to help your audience understand if they could try the same approach to a problem they face.

Interview questions to encourage 'solution' responses

- What's the problem you're trying to solve?
- How does your response work?
- Where did your idea come from?
- What's your evidence that it's effective?
 - How are you measuring success?
 - Is there any data to show as evidence?
- What's not working or needs improvement?
- Could this be replicated elsewhere?
- What would be the barriers to replicating?
- How do you plan to scale this?
- What's next?

Explore case studies from around the world

Visit the [Solutions Story Tracker](#) - a curated database of more than 16,000 stories produced in 194 countries about a broad range of issues - from climate change to mental health to environmental conservation and much more:

Further Reading:

- [Solutions Journalism Network](#)
- [Solutions Journalism Impact Tracking and Impact Tracking Guide](#) (PDF)
- [Constructive Institute](#)
- ['From Insight to Impact'](#) - Guide published by European Journalism Centre
- [Five things news media can do to respond to consistent news avoidance](#), Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2024.

Solutions Story Checklist

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 lead with the problem solving process and make it central to the narrative, not an afterthought?
4. Does the story explain how the response works - the **how-to** involved in implementation?
5. Is there **evidence** of results linked to the response?
6. Does the story explain the **limitations** of the response?
7. Is it possible for the story to convey an **insight** or teachable lesson to help your audience understand if they could put something similar into practice if they face the same problem?
8. Does the story **avoid** reading like a puff piece or PR?
9. Does the story avoid hero worship, by focusing focus on the response to the problem, instead of the individuals involved?

FURTHER READING:

[10 Questions to Inform your Solutions Journalism](#), Solutions Journalism Network, 2017



Making the business case for solutions journalism

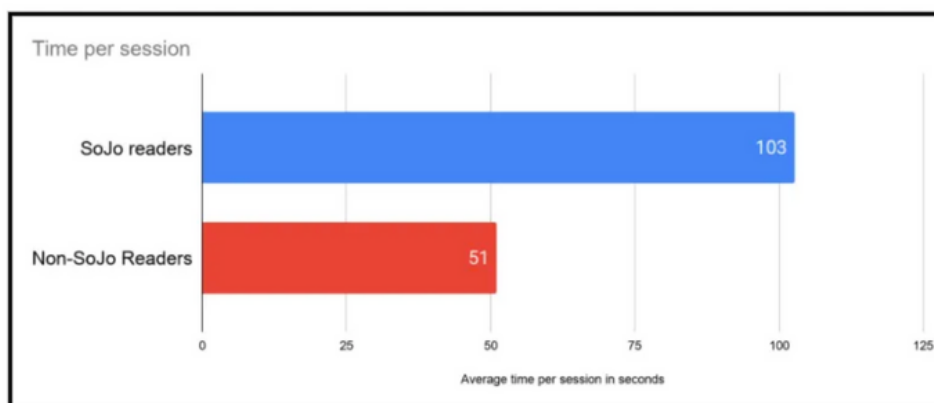
Studies of solutions and constructive journalism approaches have found it:

- Can boost audience positivity, understanding of issues and intentions to engage
- Enjoys more trust than problem-focused stories
- Builds a greater sense of connection with news organisations
- Strengthens accountability and cross-pollination of responses
- Promotes civic action and engagement
- Drive revenue

How can solutions approaches drive revenue?

Key findings of 2021 study - [Forging a path from solutions journalism to reader revenue](#):

- The majority of traffic on solutions stories were new visitors
- These visitors were 2.7x more likely to become returning visitors
- As a whole, consumers of solutions content represented a higher proportion of sessions (+2x) and pageviews (+3x) compared to share of audience.
- Readers of solutions content spent an average 100% more time per session than non-solutions journalism readers
- Readers of solutions content were 2.6 times more likely to be newsletter subscribers



How to leverage revenue from solutions stories

- Curate and signpost solutions stories to key stakeholders: subscribers, donors, advertisers, sponsors
- Track your stories for impact wherever possible, and capture impact in pitches to financial stakeholders: information on your subscriber sign-up page, pitch-decks for donors and sponsors, statistics on engagement and reach for advertisers.

How solutions can strengthen audience and community relationships

Traditional news journalism:

- Is essential to build awareness of problems and hold power to account
- Focuses on problems at the expense of information that people can use to address those problems

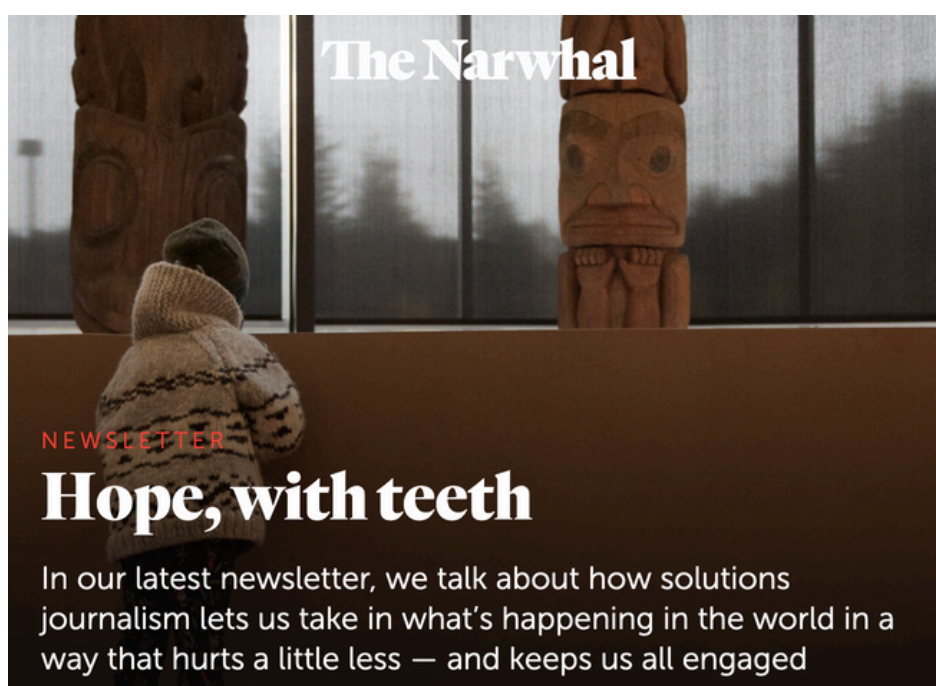
Solutions and constructive approaches to journalism:

- Create a shared goal between journalists and communities: to find ways of addressing shared problems that actually work
- Strengthen trust in, and loyalty to, your outlet

Think about where solutions stories will fit into your output e.g.

- Last or later part(s) of an investigative series
- Longform/investigative
- Podcast
- Standalone, quick bites, daily beat

Make it clear to your audience that you are embarking on a solutions approach:



Using solutions journalism to cover diverse communities

Issues that can impact diverse communities differently, where solutions approaches have been used (Source: [Solutions Journalism Story Tracker](#))

- Agriculture
- Housing
- Climate change
- Plastic pollution
- Gender equity
- Human rights
- Education
- Health care
- Disaster management
- Democracy
- Mental health
- Youth issues
- Banking

Why use a solutions approach to diversity coverage?

- Uncovers responses to problems being put into action by communities themselves
- Reframes diverse communities as having agency and self-efficacy i.e. provides a sense of hope about the future

How to build 'diversity' into your solutions coverage

- Collaborate with diverse communities on story ideas, production, and publication
- Constantly monitor your own unconscious biases and assumptions in your:
 - Choice of interviewees
 - Choice of questions
 - Choice of multimedia
 - Who you film / photograph - and how
- Understand "intersectionality": individuals can represent more than one kind of diversity - and experience more than one type of discrimination
 - Women refugees
 - Gay migrants
 - Low-income individuals from remote or rural areas
- Look for responses to more than one problem (Example: "[From queer to queer: how locals are supporting LGBTQ asylum seekers in Denmark](#)")

Pro Tip: follow the golden rule

- “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”: if this story was about you and your community, what would respectful, inclusive coverage look like?

A note about data

- Solutions stories must include **EVIDENCE** about how well a response to a problem is working
- It can be quantitative (e.g. official figures, statistics) or qualitative (e.g. anecdotal reports)
- Official data can be problematic when covering diverse communities as the data:
 - May not exist
 - May not be representative
 - May be limited
 - May reflect biases
 - May be international not national
- You may need to look for:
 - Disaggregated data - this is data that can be broken down into detailed sub-categories (e.g. by marginalised group, gender, region, education level etc)
 - Qualitative data, noting limitations



Building solutions journalism into newsroom practice

Potential barriers to implementing solutions approaches

1. Understanding what solutions / constructive journalism actually are
 - a. Lack of understanding - what characterises a 'solutions' story?
 - b. Daunting if it's new
 - c. Pushback from colleagues / editors
2. Solutions Stories can require extra time:
 - a. Enough time to gather evidence including supporting data
 - b. Extra time if processes to source solutions stories aren't in place
 - c. Extra time if not prioritised / front of mind during traditional newsgathering

RESPONSE: Training and practice

- Introductory training for reporters & editors
- Advanced training for existing staff as they build skills
- Add to onboarding documents to help new staff get up to speed

When introducing any new process or approach, try a **Stop / Start / Continue**:

Questions to explore in a Stop / Start / Continue meeting:

- What would this new thing look like in practice?
 - What examples (case studies) could be a good example for our business?
- What are we not doing that we might **start** doing?
- What are we been doing that we might **stop** doing, or put on hold while we try this new thing?
- What are we doing well / what's core to our business and must **continue**?

Conduct regular reviews to monitor your innovation: weekly, fortnightly, quarterly, yearly

- Short term - initial observations, initial adjustments,
- Medium term - initial results, team feedback, larger adjustments
- Longer term - scale up / continue / conclude

Case Study 1: The Flint Beat

- Took a **top-level decision** to build 'solutions' into the **entire business**
- Ran a Stop / Start / Continue to support new output alongside BAU:
 - Defined types of stories to prioritise
 - Genres that were a good fit for audience
 - Scale that was achievable for the business
- Set specific goals for each team in the business:
 - Management - vision, direction, rollout schedule, appoint champions
 - Editorial - output
 - Business - impact
 - Marketing - communicating with audience / revenue sources
 - HR - onboarding
 - Learning Team - role-specific training

Case study 2: Arizona Daily Reporter

- Hired a **dedicated reporter** to cover solutions stories

Case Study 3: Dallas Morning News

- Chose **specific newsroom teams** to be early adopters of solutions approaches
 - Education Lab
 - Arts
 - Science and Health
- Identified stories that might take longer
 - Week or two
 - Longer term 'project' stories
- Output provides high quality proof of concept to inspire rest of newsroom

Case Study 4: Richland Source

- Established as a '**solutions-focused newsroom**'
- Solutions approaches are built in top-down / bottom up
- SoJo part of onboarding, output, and performance evaluations / KPIs
- Peer-to-peer evaluations & feedback on specific stories

Case Study 5: Montana Free Press

- Editor-driven in editorial meetings: 'is there a **solutions angle** to this issue?'
- Built a culture of looking for solutions stories



Creating an action plan to implement solutions approaches in your newsroom

1. Guide for Editors

- Top down - if you're a manager looking to implement solutions approaches
 - Make training materials easy to access & refer to
 - Identify your early adopters / champions
 - Who's doing solutions journalism already?
 - Who's put a hand up for training or shown interest?
 - Which genres / teams would produce content the audience wants?
 - Build a team:
 - 1-2 'middle layer' editors
 - They have a decision-making role
 - What gets covered
 - How it gets covered
 - Resource prioritisation
 - 1-2 early career / recent graduates
 - May have done SoJo units at uni
 - 1-2 high-profile reporters
 - Well-respected across the business
 - Keen to innovate
 - Keep guidance clear and simple
 - Busy people juggling multiple tasks
- Discuss with your team:
 - S.M.A.R.T. goals and review dates
 - Stop / Start / Continue
 - Selection of impact metrics to help your team measure their progress
 - Social impact
 - Revenue
 - Audience engagement
 - A combination of the above
- Decide how you'll communicate progress to, and the need for support, from
 - Editorial / Marketing / Business / HR
 - Revenue sources - advertisers, funders, donors, subscribers
 - Audiences



2. Guide for Individual Journalists

- Know what solutions journalism is... and what it isn't
- Investigate parallel approaches
 - Constructive Journalism
- Add solutions questions to your interviews
 - How could this be done better?
 - What evidence do you have?
 - What would someone need to know to try this out?
 - What are the limitations of your approach?
- Take 5 extra minutes to:
 - Schedule a follow-up to a traditional news story
 - Find someone responding to a problem
 - Ask the audience for ideas about responses
- Talk to your editor about using your work as a pilot
- Become a champion:
 - Produce your content AND
 - Understand potential impact & capture it
 - Share impact internally
 - Line manager - KPI?
 - Wider business - newsletter / intranet?
 - Share impact externally
 - Flag content with your audience
- Look for allies - create a coalition of the willing

Further Reading:

- The Fix: newsletter course: [Bringing solutions journalism to your newsroom](#)
- European Journalism Centre: [Solutions Journalism Guide - An introduction for journalists and newsrooms](#)
- Solutions Journalism Network - [Learning Lab](#)
- Solutions Journalism Network: [Building a solutions journalism culture in your newsroom \[VIDEO\]](#)
- [Constructive Institute](#)
- International Media Service: [A Handbook for Constructive Journalism](#)



Defining and measuring impact for news

What is 'impact'?

Impact is a change in the status quo resulting from a direct intervention, be it a text article, a documentary film, or a live event.

- Institutional change
- Network change
- Individual change
- Media amplification

Why measure it?

- Reputation building: Categorize achievements to demonstrate your value to your audience.
- Editorial strategy: Shed light on effective reporting, engagement, and distribution strategies.
- Institutional support: Grant applications and reporting often require documentation of impact.

Creating an impact FRAMEWORK

1. Define what 'impact' means for you

- a. What does 'success' look like for you / your business / your audience?
- b. What would you see in the world to know that you are making progress towards creating impact?

Example: An audience member sends a direct email stating that they've become a first-time donor/member as the result of content they read online, or shares how a story has influenced or informed them in their life.

2. Develop indicators to track your impact

- a. What data would you need and how would you use it?
- b. What change in the status quo would you be able to observe as a result of your work?

Examples:

- Was our work (story/event/etc.) the basis for legislation?
- Did it reach a national audience?
- Did it catalyze any action within the community?
- How would you gather your data and where would your data be stored?

3. Build a tool and workflow to track your impact

- a. What technology would you need to track (1) and (2) above?
- b. Would you build the tool in house or buy it in from a third party - or combine the two?

Impact Framework Examples

Impact Type	Outcome	Indicator	Measurement Method	Data Collection
Audience / Individual	Knowledge: Audience member learned something new	Survey response	Survey	Yearly
	Action: Audience member took action	Direct feedback	Reporter / Editor Email	Ongoing

Impact Type	Outcome	Indicator	Measurement Method	Data Collection
Media amplification	Content republished by another outlet	Republication	Tracking Pixel	Monthly
	Content or data cited by another outlet	Citation	Google Alert	Monthly

Implementing your impact framework:

- Organisations implement impact measurement differently depending on the structure, impact, and mission of the organisation.
- For most, the simplest way to document your organisation's' impact is through a front end digital form (available across your organisation) with a simple backend spreadsheet for those tracking your impact most closely.

Develop an impact WORKFLOW

Impact tracking can be distributed across staff, requiring a little time from everyone each week and contributing to a culture of impact.

Building a CULTURE of impact

Staff across the organisation must be committed to the organisation's mission and to better understanding its impact:

- Start with defining your organisation's desired impacts through collective brainstorming and conversations.
- Build that culture of impact
- This works best when users get buy-in from the top of their organisation, and take time to celebrate milestones and wins across the organisation, including with external stakeholders and audiences.

To get started: take these actions, in this order:

- Set goals
- Define outcomes clearly
- Develop creative + intentional strategies to achieve those outcomes
- Choose your indicators
- Select appropriate methods for measuring progress against indicators
- Choose the tools to measure your progress LAST

Tools you can choose from

There are a few digital platforms you can use to set up a form and backend database, including:

- [Impact Tracker](#) by Impact Architects
- [Impact section](#) - Solutions Journalism Network
- Google Forms, Sheets, & Data Studio
- Airtable

This module of the [Walkley Foundation Solutions Journalism Course](#) was developed by [Impact Architects](#). Contact them for information or consultancy [here](#).



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