



## WHAT DIDN'T WORK — AND WHY IT MATTERS

A SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM GUIDE  
FOR TURNING INSTRUCTIVE FAILURES  
INTO INSIGHTFUL STORIES



When a reported “solution” to an issue fails, that doesn’t mean the story is over. In fact, it can become a valuable data point. In solutions journalism, this is called “instructive failure,” where such initiatives or interventions that do not work out can illuminate how societies respond to problems. Reporting instructive failures means going beyond who is to blame, to understand why a solution didn’t work and what can be learned from it.

In this guide, mentors in the [Constructive News: Fostering Solutions Journalism Across Europe](#) or [SoJo Europe Program](#) share practical ways to report instructive failures: stories that explore why an idea didn’t succeed, what was learned in the process, and how those lessons can shape future solutions.



**Solutions journalism is about learning, not perfection. As independent journalist and SoJo Europe mentor Catherine Edwards notes, “It’s easy to get caught up in wanting to find the best solution or the perfect solution.” SoJo stories don’t necessarily require a positive solution, and “it’s okay to report on it as an instructive failure,” she says.**

## TIPS ON TURNING INSTRUCTIVE FAILURES INTO INSIGHTFUL STORIES

**A community project that struggled with funding or a policy that didn’t achieve its intended outcomes still offers lessons worth exploring, helping keep the reporting authentic. Reporting on solutions dealing with setbacks can help audiences imagine the complexities of such issues.**

**Go back to the drawing board.** Reporters working on stories on failed solutions need to reframe their approach. *Unbias the News*’s senior editor [Ruby Russell](#) suggests starting with a sharper focus: “You need very clear questions: ‘What is the problem that we’re trying to solve?’”

In her reporting and mentoring experience, Russell reflects that some journalists are prone to the need to understand or cover everything. A clear focus, she adds, prevents the story from spiraling into a catch-all narrative. Based on her previous editorial projects on migration and energy, Russell offers some suggestions on reframing the reporting focus on instructive failures:

- **What was the goal of the solution?** And her additional question: Did you understand that solution and its goal?
- **Which assumptions turned out to be wrong?** What was the general framing used to address the issue?
- **What did the implementers learn?** And what new strategies emerged as a result?

**Look for what's new, even in failure.** When exploring failures, journalists risk rehashing familiar narratives. Freelance journalist and editor Mathilde Dorcardie shares a piece of advice that her former editor gave her on pitching stories: “You have to tell me a story that it was impossible to report on 10 years ago.” This creative test also applies to instructive failures. Investigate what's different this time, and how offered solutions might fail or have failed and why.

For example, Dorcardie prompted her mentees—who explored loneliness among older people in four European countries—to consider why interventions might fail if they don't address the root cause of the phenomenon. One solution that emerged was from a tech company offering a robot. “But if you talk to the elderly people, do they really like that to address their loneliness?”

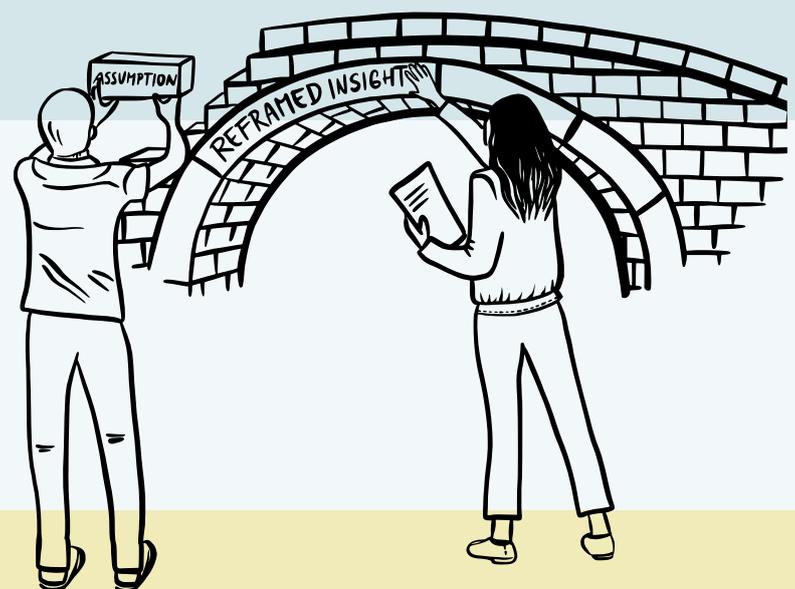
A failure story becomes valuable when it surfaces new patterns or reveals systemic blind spots. As Dorcardie puts it, “If you give me something that I already know or that I've already read, then what's the purpose?” Reporting instructive failures means showing how society learns, or even fails to learn, from its previous attempts.

**Distinguish between investigative and solutions angles.**

A story about failure can easily slip into investigative journalism territory, which identifies wrongdoing, negligence, or systemic failure. That's definitely valid. In solutions journalism, “failure” is viewed from the context of learning, as [Inclusive Journalism](#) founder Sanne Breimer shares.

“Accountability is an important question,” Breimer says of reporting on failures. “Justice is the core of investigative journalism. Solutions journalism is like the next step, and a good SoJo story will be more about something that is happening already, but doesn't succeed, and what data do we have to prove that it failed?”

When reporting on failed solutions, it will help to think of insight, not indictment. In this way, journalists help readers understand failure to make future solutions stronger, not just scandals bigger.



## JOURNALISTS CAN APPROACH AND REPORT ON FAILURE WITH DIFFERENT KEY METHODS.

**Investigative journalism asks, *Who is accountable? How can we hold them responsible for the failure?***

**Solutions journalism asks, *What can we learn? Why didn't the attempt succeed? How might others avoid the same mistake?***

**Gather evidence of failure and learning.** For Breimer, reporting on instructive failures allows journalists to get a “good understanding of how [solutions] failed so that people also don't replicate the same failure.”

Breimer advises journalists to come back to the four SoJo pillars (response, insight, evidence, and limitations) when interviewing sources.



**WHAT CAN  
PEOPLE LEARN  
FROM FAILED  
SOLUTIONS?**

A rich instructive failure story traces not just the collapse, but the learning process that follows, so “people get good insight into what was done to make it fail,” as Breimer adds, “so that they [won’t] make the same mistakes in the future.”

**Keep empowerment at the core of instructive failure reporting.** Although solutions journalism mostly aims to empower audiences, Edwards says that such stories don’t always have to be a “one-dimensional happy story.”

- Ask communities what they’d do differently
- Identify the measurable signs that a program underperformed, whether through declining participation, cost overruns, or unachieved goals
- Investigate what adaptations followed. Did stakeholders adjust their strategy, or abandon it altogether?

For her, this is where the power of reporting on instructive failures lies: not only does it show transparency, but it also gives readers a realistic sense of agency. “You can still empower people by saying, ‘This solution didn’t work out, but it taught us this and that.’ That [openness in reporting] will help us address the problem more successfully in the future.”

Remember: Reporting on instructive failures is not about glossing over setbacks but about giving readers a deeper understanding of what works, what doesn’t, and why.

When reporting on instructive failures, remember this approach:

1. **Start with clarity and define the problem the solution aimed to solve.** As Ruby Russell advises, have “very clear questions” that guide your reporting.
2. **Even failure can provide useful information.** As Mathilde Dorcadie shares, look at the failure from today’s perspective and see which aspects of new solutions might fail.

3. **Distinguish investigative and solutions angles.** And while doing so, document not just the evidence of failure but the learning that comes with it, as Sanne Breimer notes. Ask reflective questions and avoid blame-centric framing. Accountability matters, but learning is the focus.
4. **Empower but don’t pacify.** Catherine Edwards reminds us that failed solutions can still empower people through the lessons they bring.

When journalists highlight both the promise and pitfalls of social innovations, they create a public record of learning. Readers gain not just inspiration but discernment. As Russell puts it, “If journalists find that the problem that we’re looking at is being framed in the wrong way, then we can help create new narratives or tell different stories that reframe the issue.”



## CONTACT US

Whether you have questions, want a solutions journalism training or want to collaborate, our team is dedicated to supporting you. Reach out to us at [transitions@tol.org](mailto:transitions@tol.org) to explore solutions journalism, share ideas, and make an impact together.



## WE ARE HERE TO HELP

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