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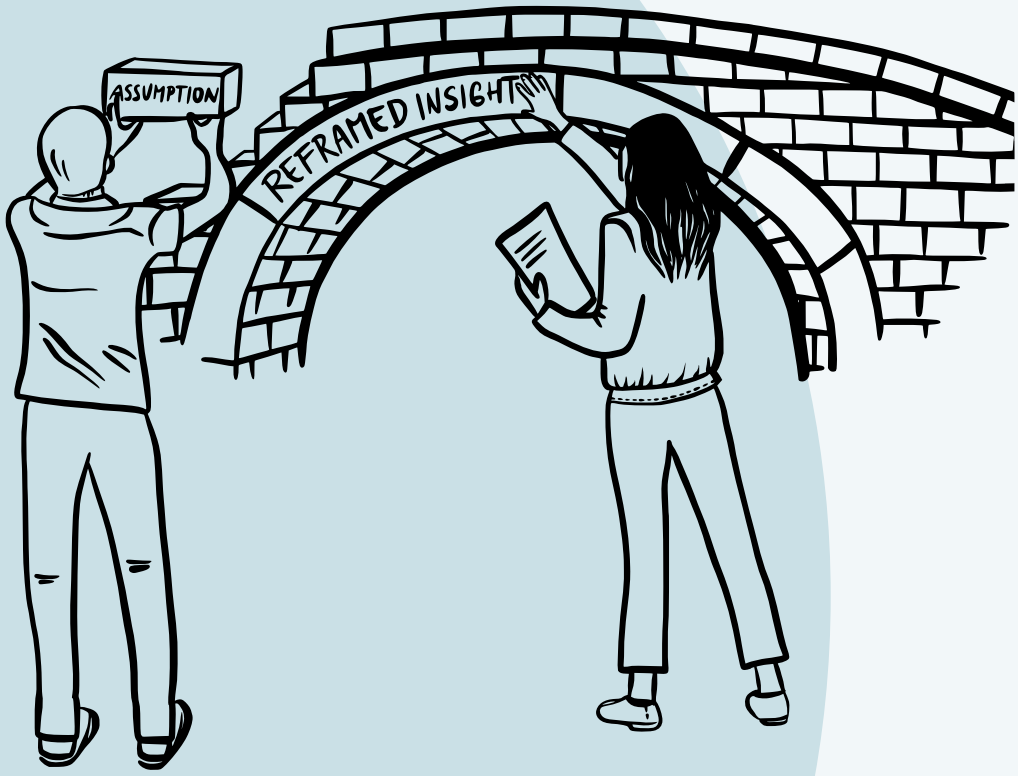
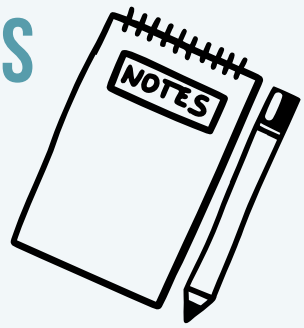


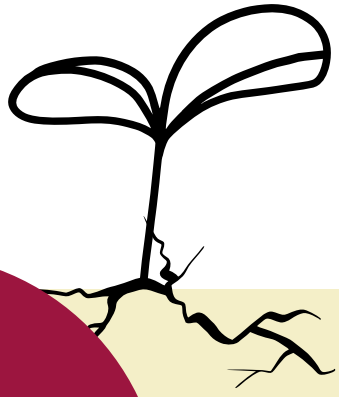
SOLUTIONS GUIDEBOOK FOR REPORTING LIVED EXPERIENCE

DEEPENING SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM INVESTIGATIONS WITH HUMAN STORIES



The use of artificial intelligence (AI) may have facilitated or impacted editorial processes, but it won't ever replace reporting and gathering data on the ground. Here, journalists can ground their stories in real human experiences that provide context and compassion—two things data or AI alone can't convey.

In this guide, the second cohort of journalists and mentors in the Constructive News: Fostering Solutions Journalism Across Europe **(SoJo Europe) Program** discusses ideas for incorporating lived experiences of communities responsibly and meaningfully from a solutions journalism (SoJo) approach. Their reflections show how to balance empathy with evidence, data with humanity, and storytelling with accountability.



FIRST... WHAT IS "LIVED EXPERIENCE"

It's the consciousness of reality that people face every day. In social sciences, lived experiences, or individuals' "self-given awareness," form and inform a common knowledge base from which "we can make sense of a phenomenon and its relation to our everyday existence".

Journalism views lived experiences as rich personal narratives that complement data as much as they capture how policies, systems, or innovations are actually felt in daily life. Yet, to avoid stereotyping, journalists must take care when incorporating lived experiences into reporting on solutions. As *Unbias the News* editor and SoJo Europe mentor Ruby Russell notes, "You've got to understand [the problem] from the perspective of somebody who has lived its impacts. [They] know it best—and often, they also hold the knowledge of what works."

LIVED EXPERIENCES AND SOJO

In the interviews for this guide, SoJo Europe cohort members and mentors shared various examples of how lived experiences could inform or deepen data analysis when reporting or investigating solutions.

- Inclusive Journalism founder and SoJo Europe mentor Sanne Breimer spoke about how an Indian journalist gathered reliable experiential and qualitative data on queer communities through private online spaces such as Telegram and WhatsApp groups to address reporting gaps.
- Russell noted that "well-meaning" NGOs, green tech companies, or Western governments that put forward solutions "very often [do] not pay much attention" to the people living through the problem. Solutions journalists, she emphasizes, have to "get the lived experience of the problem but also of the solution." This means looking at the *shared* lived experiences of the people or communities at the heart of the story.
- Karolina Rista, founder and co-owner of the Albania-based solutions-oriented production studio Media Koncept, said she draws on her experiences when starting to explore community-wide problems and solutions. She recently edited an article on Tirana's air pollution, in which the story of a child with lung disease resonated with her as a mother. "[Our team] decided to take that individual story to enrich [our reporting]. After that, we went through the data and put all the figures together," Rista added.

JOURNALISTS HAVE LIVED EXPERIENCE, TOO. SO, HOW SHOULD THEY USE IT?

At times, journalists' experiences overlap with the issue or (failed) solutions they are investigating. While reports with personal perspectives provide insight, they can raise questions about proximity and objectivity. The goal is to recognize and disclose subjectivity. It's either you will use your lived experiences to ask sharper, more empathetic questions, or endeavor to detach yourself from the experience (i.e., removing assumptions or preconceived notions completely to reach a clean slate) to see the issue and solutions from the perspective of people or the community who live through it.

Freelance editor Catherine Edwards, who used to report on migration, recognized her background to put her writing in context. "My experience as a white European English-speaking migrant is very different from someone who's actually been through a particular asylum or refugee process," she says, adding that this aspect made her "quite aware that lived experience can vary and how close [a journalist] is to a story."

BALANCING THE HUMAN EDGE, DATA, AND EXPERTISE

While more and more AI tools are proving helpful in tasks related to journalism (brainstorming, logistics planning, etc.), they cannot feel or understand what's happening on the ground. Freelance journalist and editor Mathilde Dorcadie notes that lived experience is an "underrated" resource in journalism, and that it is the "only thing that a human can do that AI cannot."

"We rely on data and factual information for good reasons. But in that process, lived experiences have become less visible, and even less credible. Yet they often reveal issues that haven't been studied or quantified. In that sense, reporting on lived experience can lead to new areas of research."

As lived experience is inherently subjective, how can solutions journalists and editors balance it with facts and expert analysis?

- **Informing empathy with accuracy.** Catherine Edwards points out the need to combine qualitative and quantitative data. "It's especially important for getting the insights," she explains, "because the objective logic of why something might work might not match up to how it applies for real people."
- **Check if things match up.** Edwards says it's ideal to interview several people with lived experience, even those who haven't been helped by a specific solution, as their collective insights will form qualitative patterns. Review that against available information because "there might be things that experts just don't think about even if they've investigated it for their whole career," Edwards adds. "On their own, the data or numbers can't capture equally the experience of people."
- **How about when data is scarce?** This can be a challenging obstacle especially for journalists in the Global South or underrepresented communities, who "[have] a hard time encountering data to back up evidence," as Breimer notes of the teams she's mentored in Asia.

Edit Pal and Zoltan Sipos, journalists from the Romanian newsroom Átlátszó Erdély, echo this challenge in Eastern Europe, where quantitative data is like a "hodgepodge patchwork of something," the latter says of data sets obtained through unclear or imprecise methodology. Pal addresses that by allowing for lead time—and a lot of that—especially when getting data from authorities. "You'll have to be aware when putting up your questions. They must be precise, because authorities can give you the answer after 30 days!" And even if the data is incomplete, Pal balances it out by seeking out the human stories behind it. That way, she says, "the story can be understood better by audiences." But remember, SoJo reports (and in any other approach) that overemphasize data risk losing their human core.

HUMANIZING DATA

Capturing lived experience and integrating it into the investigation of solutions requires time and resources. It's more complicated and more expensive than desk research, as Breimer notes, but it's also what keeps journalism human.

Dorcadie, referencing her team's exploration of loneliness in Europe, says it's easy to put together an article through internet research and data, all in the comfort of an office. "The only thing that can make a difference," she adds, "is on-the-ground reporting, asking people for their lived experience."

Her reminder is especially urgent today, as lived experiences distinguish human reporting from machine-assembled content and algorithmic summaries. "If we want to win against AI," she continues, then learning and reporting on lived experience "is what we have to do."

FLESHING OUT LIVED EXPERIENCES FOR SOLUTIONS STORIES

Lived experience isn't just a storytelling device but a method of inquiry and a way to make journalism more democratic. People who have lived an experience are the "real experts," Edwards opines, adding that journalists' role is "to listen, learn, and report back with analysis." When preparing to capture lived experiences in interviews, SoJo Europe mentors recommend:

- **Creating a safe and supportive space.** Edwards suggests "letting interviewees have a say in the location and timing" and "being really clear about the goals of the interview and [journalists'] expectations." When people speak through their lived experience, they'll feel "less prepared" and ready to share in unstructured or informal interviews than speaking with academics or counselors, she adds. "When you let people speak and work through their story in their head, that can be a time to pinpoint insights and solutions."
- **Letting the answer flow from people.** Edwards advises journalists to encourage interviewees to explain the solution, its impact or failure, in their own words. Meanwhile, Dorcadie reminds reporters to avoid parachuting in just to get confirmation or affirmation of an idea or topic they or their editors have already prepared. "Be open to changing your perspective, and maybe your story," she adds, because "sometimes, people's answers are surprising."
- **Being present, even after the interview is over.** Pal notes that interviewees truly begin to talk and tell their story as it is when they consider you a "simple human being [or] a partner." She also highlights a crucial detail: patience. "The 'relationship' between the journalist and the interviewee happens when [the latter] thinks the interview is over."
- **Using clear language.** Lived experience reporting often involves marginalized groups. The way we write can reinforce or dismantle stereotypes. In her previous reporting on the Roma community in Romania, Pal notes the trust she has received because many of her audience cannot write or follow long pieces. "After publication, they will have an impression that you're trustworthy. And then they will follow you," she adds, expressing the care that she puts in telling the lived experience of her Roma interviewees.

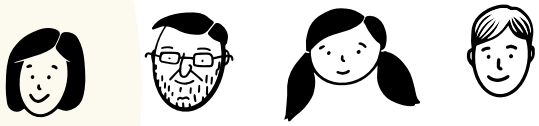
JOURNALISM WITH "TWO LEGS AND TWO EARS"

In solutions journalism, incorporating lived experiences is not just about gathering quotes but about standing somewhere, listening carefully, and letting people's realities shape how stories are told. As Dorcadie puts it bluntly, "AI won't be able to speak to people because it doesn't have two legs and two ears." To sum up:

- Treat lived experience as evidence, especially when data is lacking
- Balance personal narratives with data and expert context
- Report from the scene; compassion can't be automated
- Build trust, use sensitive language
- Let the voices of those affected guide how you frame both problems and solutions

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** to explore solutions journalism, share ideas, and make an impact together.



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