

**SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM AND THE NONPROFIT SECTOR:
TURNING HESITANCY TO HOPE**

by

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Journalism allows people to remain informed, aware and active in the community around them. However, much of the journalism we see today focuses on problems, indiscretions and fraud. Though traditional watchdog and investigative journalism are vital in maintaining a democratic society, they often do not tell the whole story of a community. A newly termed form of journalism called solutions journalism suggests that journalists should focus on people and structures trying to solve community issues, not only on the issues themselves. This thesis first looks at academic literature to examine the state of journalism in the 20th and 21st centuries, and then places these findings in the context of media coverage of the nonprofit sector. Finally, this research gathers first-hand accounts from journalists and nonprofit communications staff members about their personal experiences interacting with one another as well as the impact solutions journalism could have on both journalism and the nonprofit sector.

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Introduction: Journalism and the Nonprofit Sector

Traditionally, journalists have aimed for objective, straightforward news coverage. They try to eliminate bias and tell stories with no emotional attachment. While this type of reporting does have a place within journalism, it also has led to a news cycle dominated by problem-based narratives, as journalists often feel wary of reporting positive news. This issue doesn't simply affect journalists themselves; with few reporters telling rigorous stories about solutions, the people working to create these solutions have a harder time doing their job. Nonprofit organizations, by definition, work to create public change, but the news media and the nonprofit sector do not have a defined way to interact, and stories about nonprofit organizations often become either "fluff," with no contextual complexity, or negative investigative pieces, which give no guide on how to fix the structural issues they discuss.

In this thesis, I will analyze the state of the journalism industry as well as place my findings in the context of the nonprofit sector. I hope to put pieces of the changing journalism field together, explore the experiences and opinions of professionals in both the news industry and the nonprofit sector, and, based on my findings, offer ideas about where a newly termed form of journalism called solutions journalism could fit into this changing industry. But first, to understand the role that journalism plays in the nonprofit sector, it's necessary to understand the context of the journalism industry itself.

Journalism in the 20th and 21st Centuries

The American Press Institute (2016) defines journalism as "the activity of gathering, assessing, creating, and presenting news and information" (para. 1).

Furthermore, the Institute states, “The purpose of journalism is thus to provide citizens with the information they need to make the best possible decisions about their lives, their communities, their societies, and their governments” (“What is the Purpose of Journalism,” para. 3). So if this is true, why does so much of the news we see today focus on the negative aspects of society around us? (Moeller, 1998). How will we learn to solve problems if we aren’t given examples of solutions that are actually working? The way that journalism has evolved in the United States in the 20th and now 21st centuries has allowed for very few solution-based stories, fewer in-depth societal analyses, and a lack of public engagement that journalists could use to tell more provocative, informative stories (Moeller, 1998, Voakes, 199, & Soffer, 2009).

How Journalists Report the News

Objectivity, as a tenet of journalism, dominated the news industry in the 20th century (Soffer, 1999, Coronel, 2010, & Tully, Harmsen, Singer, & Ekdale, 2016). Journalists aimed for completely unbiased, truthful reporting, which they tried to accomplish by detaching themselves from their stories. The industry consisted of “a distancing of the reporter from the phenomenon being reported on and to the absence of any deep dialogical relationship” (Soffer, 2009, p. 478). It wasn’t until the late 1980s and early 1990s that the journalism world began to see a shift toward public and civic reporting. Civic journalism requires that “The news media in a democracy should actively foster public deliberation and debate” (Tully et al., 2016, p. 3). The basic qualities of civic journalism state that reporters have to further attach themselves to their stories and write them in a way that incorporates community discussion. However, this new idea of journalistic responsibility did not immediately catch on, and still has not fully developed.

Paul S. Voakes (1999) conducted a study of 1,037 newspaper journalists and found that journalists strongly supported four practices relating to civic journalism: developing community-problem based stories, providing information on solutions to these problems, conducting town meetings to discover key issues in the community, and polling the public to determine pressing issues. Voakes (1999) concluded, “The study seems to confirm preliminary findings from earlier research that a new conception of journalism’s role in society may be emerging” (p. 756).

In the terms of civic journalism, it is thought that newspapers should not simply report the news but also facilitate education and discussion around important public topics. However, these findings were published 18 years ago, and still this “emerging” form of journalism has not yet made it to the popular sphere (Tully et al., 2016). Research has shown that journalists tend to gravitate toward traditional practices and prefer to back off from fostering public discussion and deliberation, as they are skeptical about moving away from core news values (Davis, Rosen and Shudson, as cited in Tully et. al., 2016). According to Tully et al. (2016), “journalists are highly selective in their embrace of the civic journalism goals in the organization’s formal position” (p. 2). Community engagement is not taken as seriously as “normal” reporting, and it is often pushed to the side.

Tully et al. (2016) also found that newspapers that build engagement features in their websites do little to facilitate discussion about solutions in the community, noting that the vast majority of journalists did not feel as though fostering community discussion was part of their job. Thus, though audience engagement has become part of the structure at some newspapers around the country, the perspective of journalists themselves about

engaging audiences seems to have changed very little since the advent of civic journalism. Nearly 20 years later, the journalism industry still hesitates to embrace its role as a facilitator of communication and debate among the public. And this struggle isn't simply affecting journalists themselves; audiences continue to show lack of faith in the news media, leading to a decrease in trust and an increase in a phenomenon called "compassion fatigue," discussed below.

The Controversial Perceptions of Journalism

Researchers Peters and Broersma (2013) believed that journalists should aim to provide a public service. They wrote:

"It has long been said that journalism is there to serve the public; in fact, one could arguably say that this public-service element of journalism is its definitive mission. Yet measures which ask people about their faith in the news media to fulfill this function seem to indicate that public trust is fading" (p. 11).

However, in the changing political and social landscape of the 21st century, journalists struggle to perform this duty in a way that the public can relate to, understand and appreciate. This is in part because of the proliferation of media outlets, digitalization, economic pressures, increased competition and the questionable view of journalism by journalists themselves (Peters & Broersma, 2013). Therefore, the journalism industry must make substantial structural changes in order to meet the needs of the modern public.

Journalist and professor Susan Moeller (1998) similarly acknowledges the importance that journalism has within society. She notes, "What we know about the world is circumscribed by what the media are able to tell us – and choose to tell us – about the

world” (p. 17). Moeller (1998) says that “compassion fatigue” is to blame for the media’s seeming obsession with problem-journalism; she defines this term as a “Catch-22” in the way that the media believes consumers are bored by “just-the-facts” journalism, so they sensationally report on disease, famine, war and death without diving into the deeper social issues behind these headlines. Moeller describes the way journalists cover news as formulaic, relying on what they *think* readers want to see rather than asking them for feedback. However, she acknowledges that the media have a lack of resources to cover the news, which could be contributing to the lack of thorough reporting; “It’s not that the media – even editors and producers – typically lack imagination or initiative. But they do have a finite amount of money to spend on covering the news” (p. 19).

Alternatively, in an Arizona State University survey sent to editors and reporters at the 100 largest newspapers in the US, researchers found that 42% of respondents said that their newspapers have “a lot” of interest in investigative stories (Ide & Vashisht, 2006). But the majority of respondents also said that their newspapers don’t offer enough resources to cover investigative stories in detail. One respondent detailed that, though reporters are willing to do the work, media corporations “aren’t giving the time and resources that they did 20 and 25 years ago” (Ide & Vashisht, 2006, para. 5). In fact, 61 percent of surveyed newspapers didn’t have full-time investigative projects teams (Ide & Vashisht, 2006).

According to this study, because there are fewer resources in the industry, less money is put toward investigative work. But this may not be the only problem; the lack of in-depth stories could also be attributed to problematic resource allocation. Journalists and media corporations must ask themselves if the limited resources they have are being

funneled into stories that can better inform and educate the public. The 24-hour news cycle is as prominent as ever in this digital era. However, as previously mentioned, journalists are hesitant to accept community change as part of their jobs, even though they have power that everyday citizens do not. At the beginning of her exploration of compassion fatigue, Moeller (1998) poses the question, “How do the media choose which crises to cover?” (p. 19). Though she brings up an important thought, I think it may be the wrong one; the more important question, it would seem, would be, “How do the media choose which *story* to cover?” The original question searches for answers only among the problem-side of journalistic production, furthering Moeller’s point that the media have become sources of mostly negative information about the community. Alternatively broadening the scope of the question to include the solution-based stories, not just crises, could change the way journalists think about their job.

Oren Soffer (2009), a professor of sociology, political science and communication at the University of Israel, argues that the journalism industry must accept the difference between objectivity and dialogue in order to facilitate this necessary restructuring of priorities. According to Soffer, objectivity and dialogue cannot exist together in journalism; instead, journalists must choose one form over the other. Objective reports “require a distanced, monologic voice because any dialogical relationship will damage the journalist’s outsider and unbiased position” (Soffer, 2009, p. 474).

The question, then, is whether or not journalists can actually be objective. In recent years, much of the journalism community has transitioned into believing that objectivity cannot exist, as there is automatic bias in everything we do because each person has his or her own opinions and personal perspectives (Cunningham, 2003, Soffer,

2009). In that sense, we must turn to Soffer's idea of dialogue; "The loss of the authority of the objective monologic voice leaves us with a variety of subjective views of the world that can only join other subjective views in a dialogical process" (Lähtenmäki, 1998, as cited in Soffer, 2009, p. 474). Soffer analyzes the work of 20th century philosopher Martin Buber, who claimed that the only way humans interact is through dialogue about different subjective perceptions. Put simply, we form meaningful relationships by observing the behavior of others and becoming aware of another person's viewpoints. This, Buber believes, is how humans learn and find meaning in our day-to-day lives.

When this theory is related to journalism, it has meaningful implications. It suggests that audiences may learn best if journalists turn away from objectivity and instead focus more on gathering perspectives of their communities in order to tell meaningful stories. The journalism industry is beginning to catch on. Within the past couple of decades, with the emergence of the postmodern and digital journalism spheres, the dialogical perception has made a move to replace objectivity in modern journalism (Soffer 2009).

"Since the 1990s, studies on the dialogical aspect of communication and journalism have been increasing. These studies call, in a sense, for a return to the conversational and public functions of mass communication as they existed before being silenced by professional objective journalism practice" (Soffer, 2009, p. 484).

Through emerging movements like civic journalism, the news industry is making a slow shift away from objectivity and toward dialogue (Soffer, 2009). This shift is beneficial to journalistic audiences, as humans naturally engage with each other using dialogue to understand different perspectives (Soffer, 2009). It's important to note that the move away from objectivity in journalism does not signify a shift away from thorough, fair and knowledgeable reporting; instead, this shift simply recognizes that journalists cannot and perhaps should not aim for complete personal removal from a subject on which they are reporting. "Far from the objective-outsider position maintained by the objective journalist, the dialogic journalist wishes to play a major social and political role in communal life" (Soffer, 2009, p. 488). Without the goal of objectivity, reporters can care about a subject, still report all sides of the issue, and, in turn, make readers care, too. What the industry arguably needs, then, is a push to accept journalism as not objective, but dialogic.

Disruptive Innovation

John Pavlik (2013) addresses this need for change in the journalism industry by posing and attempting to answer the question, "Is there a pathway that preserves the best values of integrity and quality in content creation, while advancing a more cost-effective, publicly engaged media system in which graduates can find meaningful employment?" (p. 212).

Pavlik argues that the industry cannot continue with a "business as usual" mindset. He draws from Clayton Christensen's argument that we need a new type of innovation to

change the current news course. Christensen (in Pavlik, 2013) calls this idea ‘disruptive innovation.’ According to Christensen,

“Disruptive innovation involves change that transforms an entire marketplace. It expands the marketplace and adds value to the system, not just the relative position of an individual organization. It is an innovation that can stop or even reverse the dramatic decline suffered in the world of traditional media during the past several decades, and particularly in the twenty-first century” (as cited in Pavlik, 2013, p. 214).

Put simply, this research suggests, like much of the research above, that the journalism industry needs a change in direction. It needs a “Steve Jobs-type wake up call,” something that will transform the way journalism is taught and performed, so that the industry can succeed economically and with integrity (Pavlik, 2013, p. 214).

The “disruptive innovation” in the journalism industry may consist of many moving parts and ideas, and it will not happen over night. However, a newly termed form of journalism called solutions journalism could be part of this disruptive innovation in the way that it moves away from problem-oriented media and toward community- and solution-based narratives.

Solutions Journalism: A New Genre in the Journalism Industry

The Solutions Journalism Network (2016), an organization founded to educate others about the principles of this newly termed genre, defines solutions journalism as “rigorous and compelling reporting about responses to local problems...It focuses not

just on *what* may be working, but on *how* and *why* it appears to be working, or alternatively, why it may be stumbling” (para. 2). Solutions journalism addresses this relevant issue of “news fatigue” and aims to turn the news world away from simply covering problems without explaining how these problems could be solved. Of course, societies have numerous facets and complexities, and a solution could work in one community and fail in another. However, the necessity for the news to provide successful models for social change through which individuals can learn and adapt their own societal issues cannot be ignored in a world full of adversity.

Solutions journalism stories have four main “qualities,” or components, as defined by the Solutions Journalism Network: How and why something is working; strong evidence that the solution is working; insight into how this solution could be applied in other places; and limitations to the solution, because no solution is perfect. To be a true work of solutions journalism, a story must go in depth into what prompted the solution. In other words, what was original the problem? The story must provide detailed qualitative and quantitative data that shows how the solution actually works, and it must provide a model with insight that can allow community members from other places to study and replicate this solution that deals with a similar problem in their own community. Finally, it must also explain the shortcomings of the described solution. What hasn’t been accomplished yet? What is stopping the solution from becoming the best it can be? This quality ensures that reporters engage in rigorous reporting about the problematic aspects of solutions in their communities so as to show multiple sides to the story.

In 2014, the Solutions Journalism Network conducted a survey of 755 adults nationwide to gauge the effects of solutions journalism reporting. Each participant was

given an article on one of three issues, and each issue featured two similar articles: one that focused only on the problem, and one that reported on the problem as well as a potential solution to the problem. After reading the articles, the participants answered several questions.

According to the Solutions Journalism Network (2016), participants that read the solutions-based article were significantly more likely than non-solutions readers to:

“Believe they could contribute to a solution to the issue”

“Believe that there are effective ways to address the issue”

“Indicate that they felt better informed about the issue”

“Indicate that they felt inspired and/or optimistic after reading the article”

“Talk to friends or family about the issue”

“Get involved in working toward a solution to the issue”

In a time when the journalism industry could make a shift toward dialogic and civic reporting, solutions journalism offers a structure that requires rigorous reporting to ensure that the values of traditional journalism still remain intact. The positive responses from the public about solutions journalism suggest that this type of reporting could not only provide a direct benefit to audiences reading these stories, but also to the surrounding communities (Solutions Journalism Network, 2016). For nonprofit organizations, who work everyday to create solutions to societal issues, solutions journalism could help to tell these stories in a way that combines complex narrative with the intent to improve surrounding communities. But before discussing the impact of journalism on the nonprofit sector, it’s important to have some background on the sector as a whole.

Background on the Nonprofit Sector

According to the National Center for Charitable Statistics (2013), there were 945,393 registered 501(c)(3) public charity organizations in the United States in 2013. That's a 20.6 percent increase from 2003, and this number doesn't include private charities or other non-501(c)(3) organizations. The nonprofit sector also contributed approximately \$905.9 billion to the economy in 2013, composing of about 5.4% of the gross domestic product (GDP). Of that, public charities accounted for two-thirds of all registered nonprofits and over three-fourths of the US nonprofit sector revenues and expenses. After adjusting for inflation, the revenue, expenses and assets of the nonprofit sector all grew more than 10 percent between 2008 and 2013 (McKeever, 2015).

Put simply, the nonprofit sector is growing sizably, presumably with people who are trying to make a positive difference in the community. There continue to be more organizations created, which in turn have generated a greater contribution percentage to the GDP. So if there are more charitable organizations in the country that are required by their charters to provide their communities with public good, there should be more solutions created and more lives changed. However, the press rarely covers these solutions in a comprehensive way, and compassion fatigue continues. Problem stories still overrun our headlines, and nonprofit organization media teams still don't have the best communication tools to properly interact with journalists.

Problems With Nonprofit Coverage

According to award-winning journalism professor Sheila Coronel (2010), investigative and watchdog journalists "report on how laws and regulations are violated. They compare how organizations work against how they are supposed to work. They

expose how and why individuals and institutions fail” (Coronel, 2010, p. 113). In traditional journalism, this type of reporting is celebrated for its unwillingness to waver on social justice issues and its drive to hold people in power accountable. However, in the description above, among the most powerful words are “violated,” “expose” and “fail;” though this form of journalism can shed light on corruption and dishonesty, the frame in which it is currently depicted may highlight a topic or issue without focusing on other elements of the story, such as successes or proposed solutions. Fierce watchdog investigations of the nonprofit sector have perpetuated the idea of fraud and unaccountability in nonprofit organizations, specifically regarding financial transparency.

Take, for example, the 1998 watchdog story produced by nine Chicago Tribune reporters about the child sponsorship agencies that function within the nonprofit sector. The series presented a “scathing critique” of four child sponsorship agencies, wishing to inform the community of the “misuse” of donor funds (“Standards for Child,” 2002). The investigation ended with “the overall impression of organizations that were feckless at best and guilty of deceptive practices at worst,” though the reporters found that, despite a lack of information given to donors about where their money was actually going, the nonprofits did not misuse their funds (“Standards for Child,” 2002, p. 1).

Journalists conduct investigative reports on nonprofit organizations through databases such as GuideStar and Charity Navigator, which document an organization’s percentage of administrative expenses. These expenses, deemed “overhead costs,” are vital to the facilitation of nonprofit programs, but negative news coverage about extraneous costs leads funders to believe that nonprofits with high overhead rates are

corrupt (Goggins & Howard, 2009). This misconception leads to nonprofits “starving” themselves of the administrative resources needed to run their organizations and is thus termed the “Nonprofit Starvation Cycle.” Although corruption does exist in the nonprofit sector, and watchdog reporting has a strong place in upholding truth, transparency and accountability, it also doesn’t tell the whole story of an issue. To get the full picture, journalists need to report on successes as well as failures.

There are several guides to covering nonprofit organizations for journalists online, including a Poynter News University course (2016) and nonprofit ‘toolbox’ provided by the Society of Professional Journalists (2012), and almost all resources cover how to read nonprofit tax-exemption form 990 and how to use charity navigator sites to investigate financial information. But while journalists should be aware of financial indiscretions within the nonprofit sector, there is little additional information readily provided to journalists about how to properly cover the successes and positive aspects of nonprofit organizations without their stories reading as public relations.

It is clear that journalists themselves contribute to the problematic relationship between journalism and nonprofit organizations. However, communications staff members in the nonprofit sector also have trouble relaying their narratives to news media, substantiating the void between the two industries.

How Nonprofits Communicate

The first sentence of the *Strategic Communications for Nonprofits* handbook states, “How can we get people talking about the real problems in our society?” (Bonk, Tynes, Griggs & Sparks, 2008, p. 1). The goal for nonprofit communication comes down

to this thought: people need to pay attention to the underlying social issues in their communities. According to McKeever (2013), nonprofits have the perfect platform to be able to spread the word. She says,

“In other words, upstream influences need to be connected to downstream conditions in order to improve public health. Nonprofit health organizations help make these connections, illuminating causes for problems through advocacy and communication campaigns, and raising funds to provide research, treatment, and other solutions for important health problems” (McKeever, 2013, 307-308).

Though McKeever discusses nonprofit communication specifically in the realm of nonprofit health organizations, these ideas can be transferred to nonprofit communication in general; these organizations understand problems and, ideally, can show the world the details of these problems while trying to solve them at the same time. They should be the experts of their fields, and their expertise should translate to relations with journalists (McKeever, 2013, Bonk, et. al., 2008).

When looking at nonprofit communication from a more theoretical perspective, Aldoorj & Sha (2007) note the importance of audience interest, as McKeever suggests above, through the lens of the situational theory of publics. This theory, originally formed by James E. Grunig in 1968, relies on three factors to predict communication behaviors: problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement (as cited in Aldoorj & Sha, 2007). These factors determine the extent to which people recognize a problem facing them, the extent to which people perceive issues that could stop them from

changing their behaviors, and how relevant a problem is for a specific individual. All three of these factors have been proven to affect “whether and how much an individual engages in information processing and information seeking” (Aldoory & Sha, 2007, p. 341). For instance, information gathering can only happen if people pay attention to a message, and behavior changes can only happen if someone has gathered information and accepted their ability to change in a given situation.

According to Grunig (in Aldoory & Sha, 2007),

“Active publics have low constraint recognition and high problem recognition and involvement; these publics are actively seeking information about a problem and are potentially sharing information and becoming activists about it. Aware publics have high problem recognition and involvement, but due to higher levels of constraint recognition, do not move to action... Latent publics have low problem recognition, but their level of involvement is still moderate to high. Latent publics are often designated as targets of campaign messages” (p. 341-342).

Though this theory is founded in the principles of public relations, it is connected to the idea of communication as a whole, including that of journalistic communication. So if compassion fatigue is true, and people are tired of reading problems with no solutions, then they may be considered a latent public. Based on the core definitions of journalism (American Press Institute, 2016), it’s up to the media to give audiences the information they need to move beyond constraint recognition; journalists have the power to inspire community action.

Solutions Journalism Impact

Solutions journalism can be a part of this movement to action. As stated above, in a Solutions Journalism Network study, people who read solutions journalism stories were more likely to say they would get involved in their community in a positive way than those who read “traditional” news stories (Solutions Journalism Network, 2016). This could mean that nonprofits, which are restricted by definition to work toward solutions in their community, could be used as a tool in the solutions journalism process to more thoroughly inform the public.

In April 2016, Andrea Wenzel, Daniela Gerson, and Evelyn Moreno looked more in-depth at the effects of solutions journalism, particularly at the local level and within stigmatized communities. They conducted six focus groups with 48 African-American and Latino residents in South Los Angeles to gather feedback on the solutions journalism media project of which they had previously been a part (Wenzel, A., Gerson, D., & Moreno, E., 2016).

While discussing the role of traditional media in focus groups, participants explained that they were unhappy with the way South LA was covered, and that there was a “disconnect between media portrayals and their experiences” (Wenzel et al., 2016, para. 42). Though many participants acknowledged the importance of covering crime, violence and other negative news stories, they also emphasized the gap they see between their own lives and the lives they see portrayed in the news. Participants addressed the lack of investigative coverage of their community and noted that, in some ways, local media can be “harmful” in the negative weight it carries in people’s lives.

Alternatively, when asked about solutions journalism, participants said that they would be “more likely to seek out news and share stories if solutions journalism were common,” and “many noted that our sample stories helped them envision a way to become personally involved in community problem solving” (Wenzel et. al., 2016, para. 5). Though focus group participants were in favor of journalists reporting vigorously about the problems in their communities, they mostly agreed that the news media needs more solutions-based reporting as well.

After their study concluded, Wenzel et al. (2016) offered the following recommendations to media outlets:

- 1) Strengthen storytelling networks between organizations, media and residents,
- 2) Expand engagement opportunities to residents at all stages of a story,
- 3) Use solutions journalism in underserved communities to build stronger relationships,
- 4) Encourage journalists to consider appropriate representation when talking to stigmatized communities, and
- 5) Invest in follow-up coverage and lasting relationships with communities covered.

This thorough study reflects the potential for journalists to have a more lasting impact on underprivileged communities. I hope to add to this research by talking to the producers of news, rather than the recipients, and by discussing the role of the media specifically with nonprofit staff.

Based on the extensive research above, I propose the following research questions for this thesis:

- 1) How have journalists and nonprofit communications staff traditionally interacted?
- 2) How do journalists view their interactions with nonprofit communications staff?
- 3) How do nonprofit communications staff members view their interactions with journalists?
- 4) How could a solutions journalism approach affect the way journalists report on nonprofit organizations?

Method

The data for this thesis came from 10 in-depth interviews. Interviewees were a mix of journalism and nonprofit professionals. Original participants were chosen based on their job title and relevance to the topic, though I used “snowball sampling” to gather names of possible subjects from people whom I had already interviewed.

I used a standard list of questions for the nonprofit staff members and a separate list of questions for journalists. However, because all interviews take different paths, unique questions were asked of different participants based on the course of the interview. Because not everyone was familiar with the term “solutions journalism,” I used a standard definition to explain the basic qualities to each interviewee who did not know about the genre before talking with me. The phone interviews ranged from 20-40 minutes and were recorded for the sake of transcription and analysis, and there were two email interviews. All interviewees agreed to be recorded and to release their names and job titles before the start of the interview, as the University of Oregon IRB considered this a low-risk study. I obtained IRB approval prior to conducting interviews.

To analyze the interviews, I followed the University of Wisconsin (2003) guidelines for qualitative data analysis, which includes five steps: get to know the data, focus the analysis, categorize the information, identify patterns within the data, and interpret the data (p. 2-5). Getting to know the data includes transcription and reading of all interviews, and I focused the analysis by posing the research questions, listed above (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). To categorize the data, I identified themes that related to the research questions and placed them together, and I then identified patterns by searching for common themes within all of the interviews. Finally, in order to interpret the findings, I aimed to “attach meaning and significance to the analysis” by seeking out the major lessons in the interviews, as related to the thesis research questions (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003, p. 5). These interpretations can be found in the “Results and Conclusion” section of this thesis.

Interview Analysis

Ten communications professionals were interviewed for this thesis: three nonprofit staff members, three journalists, one journalist-turned-public agency employee, one communications assistant professor, and two communications consultants. Because this is a small sample, and the communications field spans across many other sub-fields, these interviews do not represent the overall perspective of communications professionals. However, all of the interviewees have extensive professional experience and provide valuable insight into the discussion of journalism and the nonprofit sector, specifically in answering the research questions listed above. I have listed the names, professions, and relevance to the research of interviewees below.

Amy Callahan, phone interview

Amy Callahan is the Director of Communications and Advancement at the Nonprofit Association of Oregon. She also worked in the newspaper industry before her time in the nonprofit sector. Her experience in both fields as well as her expertise in nonprofit communications added to the varying perspectives through the interview process.

Ann Schimke, phone interview

Ann Schimke is a reporter and community editor at Chalkbeat Colorado, an education-based nonprofit news organization. One of Schimke's articles about the Colorado nonprofit Growing Home was featured on the Solutions Journalism Network site, making her a unique candidate who talked about the process of writing a solutions-based story about a nonprofit organization. I also interviewed the CEO of Growing Home, and it is important to compare this interview with Schimke's to look at both perspectives of this process.

Joey Bunch, email interview

Pulitzer Prize-winner Joey Bunch is a political reporter for the Denver Post. He has worked as a reporter in the field for over 30 years, and his outlook on watchdog and traditional journalism is vital background to this research. Joey Bunch covered a story about the audit of nonprofit organization Rocky Mountain Human Services, and his interview intersected with the interview of RMHS Executive Director Shari Repinski, listed below.

Jordan Steffen, phone interview

Jordan Steffen is a former Denver Post reporter and is currently the Communications and Policy Director of Colorado's Child Protection Ombudsman Office. With her investigative piece "Failed to Death," Steffen exemplified the importance of in-depth story coverage, making her a strong interview subject for this research. *Jordan Steffen is not speaking on behalf of the Ombudsman Office and instead is speaking as a former journalist and communications professional.

Joy Mayer, phone interview

Joy Mayer is an engagement strategist and consultant. She works with newsrooms and nonprofits to see how they can best serve their audiences. Because she has extensive experience with both nonprofit communication and journalism, she provided unique insight with perspectives from both fields.

Matthew Powers, email interview

Matthew Powers is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Washington. His research centers in part on the intersection of NGOs and journalism, public relations and advocacy, making his perspective relevant and important to this thesis.

Sacha Evans, phone interview

Sacha Evans is a senior associate at a strategic communications firm called Douglas Gould and Company, or DG+CO, whose mission is to “help progressive nonprofit organizations and foundations advance important causes.” Evans offers a unique look into strategic communications oriented specifically toward the nonprofit sector.

Samantha McCann, phone interview

As the Director of Communities for the Solutions Journalism Network, Samantha McCann provided an important perspective to this research, as she works directly with reporters and communities in order to facilitate conversations about solutions journalism.

Shari Repinski, phone interview

Rocky Mountain Human Services Executive Director Shari Repinski responded to questions about negative news coverage about her organization and how solutions journalism could affect this coverage. In her interview, which corresponds with Joey Bunch’s article “Denver audit finds ‘shameful’ misspending for intellectually disabled,” she discusses the process nonprofit organizations go through when they have been covered negatively in the news.

Teva Sienicki, phone interview

Teva Sienicki is the CEO of Growing Home, a place-biased anti-poverty organization located in Denver, Colorado. Her organization was part of a program called “Blocks of Hope,” which aimed to improve schools in the community. She talks specifically about

the interactions between the organization and Ann Schimke, who wrote an extended story about the program's progress.

Research Question 1: How have journalists and nonprofit communications staff traditionally interacted?

Overall, interviewees' descriptions paralleled much of the academic research discussed above. However, to give context for the rest of the research questions, I'll briefly discuss some of the overarching themes of traditional nonprofit organization and journalism interaction.

Amy Callahan, the Director of Communications and Advancement at the Nonprofit Association of Oregon, noticed that nonprofit organization staff members usually haven't been trained well in how to pitch stories to the news media. She said that, normally, these organizations want to have their events covered, but they don't always talk about the greater good an event could do for the larger social issue. Engagement strategist and consultant Joy Mayer, who works with both nonprofits and journalists to improve their audience messaging, discussed this issue further, acknowledging that journalists often receive dozens of press releases a day, and they end up deciding which stories will run based on how captivating the pitches are and how likely the public will be to want to read about that issue. In other words, according to Callahan and Mayer, there has been a cyclical way that nonprofits pitch to newsrooms, and this method has become normalized to the point that it is not best serving either party.

Chalkbeat Colorado reporter and community editor Ann Schimke brought up another perspective of the traditional interaction between journalists and nonprofits. She

said that, because of the limited resources in the journalism field, reporters end up covering stories that don't go in-depth enough to study the story's underlying issues. For instance, Schimke referenced a report released by a nonprofit organization that was picked up by almost all of the newspapers in the state, but several newspapers wrote a negative story about the report without having the context to back up their claims. Using this as an example, Schimke highlighted the issues that come with incomplete or unknowledgeable reporting. Jordan Steffen, former Denver Post reporter, said that part of this problem could be from the plethora of media platforms that have emerged, including social media:

“As the news becomes more readily available, kind of the big boom impact that you used to get out of a full-fledged investigation on the front of the newspaper maybe has lessened a little bit because there's so much access to media and news reports, and it's coming at you so fast that the way we absorb news has changed,” said Steffen.

University of Washington assistant professor Matthew Powers added another opinion on the topic, mentioning that there is no specific nonprofit news beat in traditional media, so organizations have had to find their way into political news in which government officials tend to be the primary sources. This means nonprofit organizations often fall to the background in politically dominated stories. Powers added, “While the idea of a nonprofit beat is unlikely, there are certainly problems with the fact that the sector has so little public oversight.”

Although this context about the traditional interactions between journalists and nonprofits is interesting to note in comparison with the academic research above, perhaps a more important aspect to investigate is the way in which these professionals view their current communication with each other.

Research Question 2: How do journalists view their interactions with nonprofit communications staff?

Field Experts

Several of the interviewees said that they saw nonprofit organizations as helping to provide more information to their story; they can provide information and analysis about the problems they attempt to solve and the populations they serve. Jordan Steffen, a former journalist for the Denver Post and current communications and policy director at a local public agency, said that when she was covering human service stories, she “called on them to provide context, to provide expert voices and stories about these issues,” noting that some stories required context from nonprofit organizations, and others didn’t:

“There’s just kind of this process you go through in reporting a story and that, you know, you need to get as many voices in there as you can, as many different perspectives as you can, and sometimes that’s how nonprofits worked, and sometimes I didn’t use nonprofits in my work at all,” she said.

Steffen said that, though she did call upon nonprofit organizations for story context and to aid in her reporting, she never actually covered the field as a subject.

Ann Schimke also acknowledged the importance of covering nonprofit organizations, as they can provide valuable perspective on society, but noted that “there’s honestly not a lot of reporting” about topics such as healthy schools or early childhood education, which could show other school systems how to do things better. “My job is to put... information out there to inform the debate, raise awareness about what the issues even are,” she added. So while nonprofits can often be seen as experts in their fields of social issues, some social issues aren’t covered to the extent to which these organizations can share their wealth of information.

Personal Interactions

When it came to specific stories, journalists had mixed reviews about covering nonprofit organizations. For instance, Joey Bunch, a reporter for the Denver Post, wrote an investigative story titled “Denver audit finds ‘shameful’ misspending for intellectually disabled” about a well-known nonprofit in the Denver area and noted, “They weren’t cooperative at all.” He added that the nonprofit he covered for this piece, Rocky Mountain Human Services, did not publically disclose their financial transactions and instead ignored public questioning. (We will hear from the executive director of RMHS in the following section to compare their interaction perspectives). However, Schimke, who also covered a nonprofit organization called Growing Home in the Denver area, had an entirely different experience, saying, “They didn’t know exactly what the story was going to say... but they never expressed suspicion or anxiety.” Though Schimke worked with

Growing Home for over a year, she said that they were always willing to answer her questions honestly.

Obviously, as with any story, journalists came across sources that were easier to communicate with than others. However, it's interesting to note that Joey Bunch wrote a traditional investigative story, and Ann Schimke wrote a solutions journalism-style story, which could have affected the way they interacted with the respective subjects of their stories. Schimke and Bunch also work at two different styles of newsrooms; Schimke at the small, independent nonprofit news organization Chalkbeat, and Bunch at the Denver Post. It would be interesting if future research could differentiate perspectives on the subject between larger, more corporate newsrooms and smaller, niche-oriented newsrooms such as Chalkbeat.

Nonprofit Hesitancy

Although the journalists had mixed responses based on story coverage of specific organizations, there was consensus about the overall hesitancy of journalists and nonprofit communications staff to interact with each other.

Schimke acknowledged that, sometimes in her career, she comes across nonprofit organizations that are hesitant to speak with journalists because they fear they might "look bad." She noted that this might be because, while nonprofit organizations do a lot of good, they don't like to publicly portray their problems, especially to the press. Joy Mayer said that this idea may be perpetuated by journalists who want to make sure they aren't simply covering "fluff" stories; "There's this fear that if they work together, some really important line will be crossed, and the integrity of the journalism will be affected and the serious work of the journalist will be lessened," said Mayer. So journalists avoid writing

stories about single, “fluffy” events because they don’t think it’s an essential story, but instead of looking for positive stories with more depth, they avoid the conception all together and focus on traditional problem reporting.

Matthew Powers attributed some of this hesitancy to the fact that some nonprofits may only want to be covered in a certain light. He discussed that, while most nonprofit organizations never get any news coverage, many organizations want to limit their coverage in an attempt to control the way they are portrayed in the media. Powers said this might be because “the US is not setup in ways that favor sustained, rigorous coverage of nonprofits,” so there is a “mixed bag” of coverage that often focuses on the less serious or scandal-driven aspects of nonprofit organizations. While he also stated that there is some quality reporting about these organizations, Powers acknowledged that nonprofits may have good reasons to feel hesitant about communicating with journalists.

Research Question 3: How do nonprofit communications staff members view their interactions with journalists?

Discontent with the media

An underlying theme among the interviews with nonprofit communications staff members was that there was a general sense of distrust, or at least hesitancy, surrounding media presence, which reflects the previous acknowledgements of the journalism professionals.

Shari Repinski, the executive director of Rocky Mountain Human Services, took over the organization in the midst of a city audit that uncovered several financial indiscretions within RMHS. Repinski acknowledged that her organization made financial

mistakes, for which no excuses could be made; however, she also said, “When the media release came out with the language around shameful misspending and all of the inflammatory words – I’m not saying they were wrongly inflammatory – but they were powerful, emotional words.” As was discussed earlier, objectivity in journalism may not be possible. And the way that the media forms stories, even at such a small level as diction and sentence structure, can affect the way the public sees an organization or issue. Repinski said that, as a result of “inflammatory” language, her staff still tends to say “no comment” to media inquiries, as they fear that “there’s always going to be a negative spin.” She noted that, of course, the media must tell stories that involve use of public money in order to hold those in power accountable, but the problem of distrust between media and nonprofit staff needs to be solved, otherwise journalists will not get the information they need, and organizations will not be able to spread their knowledge about social issues.

Sacha Evans, Senior Associate at strategic communications firm DG+CO, addressed this issue from a different perspective: the overhead myth. Overhead costs, as discussed in the background of this research, include staff salaries, resources like computers and office supplies, and other items that help the organization function. According to Evans, “journalists often apply that word erroneously in the sector,” and the framing of organizations in the context of fraud causes a sector-wide hesitancy and distrust of journalists. “If you want to have a professional organization that’s able to get those email alerts out, that’s able to have a functioning website, that’s able to go to Washington and do legislative activities, that often gets lumped under overhead,” she said. As with the other professionals, Evans concluded that the traditional way that the

media have covered nonprofit organizations has had a large effect on how nonprofit staff members interact with journalists.

Several of the nonprofit communications staff members also discussed ways that journalists were lacking, in terms of reporting and storytelling. For instance, Amy Callahan suggested that, because journalists have the power to “shine a light” on issues in the community, they should consider taking more time to tell stories about nonprofits that are doing work in the community to solve societal issues. She added, “There’s a misconception around what it means to be a nonprofit,” and she believes that journalists could be part of the solution by creating a better-informed public. Shari Repinski agrees, noting that the general public often doesn’t understand what the nonprofits in their community actually do, or even know what services are available. “There’s a lot of good stuff that nonprofits do everyday that doesn’t, it just doesn’t get recognized,” said Repinski. “And so I think it’s critical for the media to at least be able to tell some of these stories.”

Problem-Oriented Press

One theme that was repeated throughout almost all of the interviews, nonprofit staff and journalists alike, was the coverage of problems in the news media, which brings back the idea of compassion fatigue. “That storytelling lens is applied across media outlets universally,” said Evans, “and I think nonprofits often shy away from highlighting any sort of problem.” So according to Evans, because nonprofits only want to focus on solutions and journalists seem to focus largely on problems, there is a disconnect in the motives of each party. She gave the example of United Nations coverage, which she has noticed focuses largely on UN workers performing misdeeds. “I mean, the UN does so

much good work, but for some reason, their press is so bad.” To Evans, this negative coverage skews the beliefs of the public in a way that can permanently harm an organization, which can ultimately reduce funding and support of a particular organization.

Similarly, after Rocky Mountain Human Services’ negative media coverage, Repinski noted that, though the organization attempted to create positive change in the community and to correct its wrongdoings, “people can’t talk about what’s going on in our system without an online flag to the public shaming that we had.” So, though RMHS is working to solve organizational problems, Repinski said media attention is still focused on the past, provoking negative images in readers’ minds. The nonprofit staff members recognize that it’s important to tell problem-based stories, but they also agreed that journalists could do a better job of incorporating solutions into their news narratives.

Growing Home CEO Teva Sienicki thinks this may be in part because journalists don’t find nonprofit solution stories exciting. “For better or worse, nonprofits are in a critical role in most issue areas, and it’s the issue areas that need coverage,” she said. Without the positive news coverage, Sienicki believes it is simply harder to solve societal issues.

Imperfection in Both Fields

Though the nonprofit communication staff had several concerns about their interactions with journalists, they acknowledged that journalism is also a struggling industry. Both Sienicki and Evans discussed the lack of resources in the journalism field and how the financial situation determines which issues are reported on and, alternatively, which stories remain untold.

Furthermore, all of the interviewees said that the nonprofit sector still has a long way to go in the communications field. “There are so many things nonprofits need to do better,” Sienicki said. “Some of the problems with how a journalist might interact with a typical nonprofit are reflective of some of the problems in the industry in general.” When Sienicki discussed these problems, she included the fact that communications proficiency in the nonprofit sector is disproportionately centered on large organizations that can afford their own communications teams, even though the majority of nonprofits in the country are smaller, local organizations. Sienicki referred to a “sweet spot” of organizations that are making a difference in the community, saying they may be “advocacy organizations... that are looking to change how business is done in their industry.” She wants news media to focus on the organizations that are trying to change the way the third sector operates.

Amy Callahan also noted that nonprofit organizations are not blameless in their lack of media coverage, saying, “Nonprofits want stories to further their own self interests. And while this behavior can be altruistic, she said, journalists tend to avoid any situations that could come off as advocacy. So if a nonprofit organization fails to honestly show its weaknesses as well as its strengths, the media may shy away from in-depth coverage of the sector.

Research Question 4: How could a solutions journalism approach affect the way journalists report on nonprofit organizations?

Overall, interviewees had a positive reaction to the idea of solutions journalism, though there were differing opinions on how the incorporation of this genre may look, both in the newsroom and in the field.

Journalist Opinions

Samantha McCann said that it is journalism's duty as a whole to provide the public with as many solutions stories as there are problems stories. "It shouldn't be 80/20, or 98/2 like it is now," she said. As one of the leaders of the Solutions Journalism Network, McCann said she wants solutions journalism to become another tool in the everyday journalist's toolbox, writing solution-based stories as often as problem-based stories. Journalists seemed more hesitant to accept solutions journalism as a definitive genre, but they were open to the ideas and methods that solutions journalism could provide in their reporting.

For example, Ann Schimke said that one of the goals she had in telling the story of Growing Home was to demonstrate that a place-based initiative didn't have to stem from wealthy places. She wanted to tell Colorado that the small community of Adams County could be successful in improving education. Throughout her story, she met with people from a Colorado school system that is often met with criticism. The teachers and parents from the system told Schimke, "We wish that some of the stories would look at some of the things that are working... and not just, like, that we suck." It's important to remember that Schimke did not write this story as intentional solutions journalism; "I think it's just kind of a reminder that this is a frame to look at story ideas," said Schimke, who made sure her story wasn't just a "celebration story" without substantial context.

Joey Bunch noted that the idea of solutions journalism is not new and can only work if journalists remain unbiased. "You have to apply the tools a journalist uses every time: fairness, skepticism, analysis and balance," said Bunch. "You can't become a cheerleader and call yourself an independent journalist." Jordan Steffen agreed, noting

that it's more important to focus on "good journalism" than on solutions journalism specifically, but if using solutions journalism qualities creates good journalism, then she says it has a place in the media world. Matthew Powers echoed this perspective and noted that there are "certainly opportunities for journalists and nonprofits to collaborate and better address social issues," as long as journalists make sure that the nonprofit solutions they are reporting on are "good ones."

Nonprofit Staff Opinions

The nonprofit communication staff members all agreed that, not only could solutions journalism positively affect coverage of their organizations, but it also could improve the way that societies learn about and tackle widespread community issues. When Sienicki discussed her interaction with Ann Schimke, who wrote a solutions story about the organization Growing Home, she said that Schimke simply "got it more," referring to the overall story of her organization. In part, Sienicki attributes the thoroughness of the story to her willingness to be transparent about the organization's flaws. This openness, paired with Schimke's reporting style, helped both individuals to think critically about and analyze the issue of childhood education in their communities. "It was a really good process because she was able to help me reflect differently on things with some of the questions that she asked," said Sienicki. "It's really rare that there's a journalist really digging in as deep."

Solutions Journalism Network Director of Communities Samantha McCann added to this idea of societal progression, saying, "You're really there to show your readers and your audience that progress is being made, that things can get better, and this is how one institution did it, or this is how one organization did it." According to McCann,

a lot of the initial pushback from journalists included the question of being able to play the role of “watchdog” in order to hold authority figures accountable, which often has been placed in traditional problem-based story structure. But McCann said solutions journalism is a more thorough way of keeping those in power accountable for their actions:

“I think after a certain period of time you can feel like you’re really just tearing down individual after individual and institution after institution because they’re problem-based stories. That’s fine, and they’re even efficiently written, but you have to wonder what the 25th story on a failing school is going to do. What’s that going to accomplish? Is that going to change anything if we know one more detail about what this school failed? People really need models for change, models for success.”

The model for success, in McCann’s eyes, can begin with solutions journalism. “Journalists create the world,” she said, so they are responsible for informing the public not just of the problems that are occurring around them, but of the people and institutions who are working to solve these problems.

In Shari Repinski’s case, solutions journalism takes the organizational focus away from past struggles with a more positive, future-oriented approach. “It’s not unusual for organizations, especially nonprofit organizations, to go through a rough patch,” she said. “And I think the long-term benefits of what we can provide is much greater than a single event that has sort of taken us down for 12 months, or whatever that time period may be.”

Without being a fluff piece, Repinski said that she believes solutions journalism could address organizational flaws and struggles with an overall goal to show other organizations and individuals how to progress from past situations.

Amy Callahan noted that, with more solutions-based stories, communities can become aware of societal issues as well as the organizations that are attempting to solve those issues. “I think if it’s truly a piece that shows, here’s a solution, here’s how it’s not quite perfect, then maybe it will help to have people bring their best ideas to help make the solution even better,” she said. In other words, Callahan hinted that solutions journalism could be a catalyst for change, informing people in the community about ideas for social change and concrete steps they can take to be a part of the solution.

External Opinions

As communications consultants, Joy Mayer and Sacha Evans had a broader look at the idea of solutions journalism, discussing how this genre could affect the interactions of journalists with nonprofits.

In a 2016 gathering of nonprofit and journalism professionals, Mayer said she saw the excitement nonprofit staff members felt about the possibilities that solutions journalism could bring to their organization. However, she thinks it’s important to understand that solutions journalism isn’t “free publicity;” It’s “aggressive,” thorough reporting. And while she said she thinks solutions journalism is an opportunity for journalists to share information that could improve the infrastructure of communities, she also wishes that the journalism industry didn’t have to call it solutions journalism. “I think the solution to this problem is not necessarily for every newsroom to be talking about solutions journalism,” she added. “It would be for newsrooms to kind of adopt the

philosophies, whether it's conscious or unconscious." In this way, Mayer's response reflected the thoughts of the journalist interviewees who equated solutions journalism with simply good reporting.

Evans also discussed the role that solutions journalism could play in the interaction between journalists and nonprofit organizations, but she framed it in a different way. She said that, through solutions journalism, nonprofit organizations could learn what it means to communicate effectively, and journalists could facilitate the process by telling powerful, thorough solutions-based stories.

"I think that nonprofits can learn a lot from reading news coverage, understanding how it's built, and if there is this model for stories around solutions, I think they can really adopt that approach and tell stories internally in their materials, in their brochures, in their emails, the exact same way," said Evans.

In this way, not only can solutions journalism be effective in telling the stories of the positive work occurring in the community, but, according to Evans, it also has the potential to teach nonprofits how to tell their story in a more powerful, rigorous way.

One Thing I Didn't Anticipate

Through the interview process, I had the chance to learn about how solutions journalism could affect the way that journalists and nonprofit organizations interact. However, as I talked to these communication professionals, I kept hearing bits of

information and ideas that didn't fit into any of the categories I laid out in my research questions; I was not expecting interviewees to be so open about criticizing their own fields for the sake of providing solutions to their communication problems. All of the interviewees had bigger ideas, outside of solutions journalism, that could enhance the communication between these professional fields.

Audience Engagement

One of the most common themes brought up in interviews was increased audience engagement. Joy Mayer encouraged journalists to ask the community, "What do journalists usually get wrong when they cover you?" She said the results that journalists hear can alter the way they tell stories about their own communities. Traditionally, journalists have been expected to steer away from audience engagement, but Mayer says this thinking can actually negatively affect the way that problems in the society are covered because journalists won't know what the public wants to know. She said journalists need to "stop and look at whether it's actually getting consumed and look at who has found it and be willing to invest some time in sharing it with people you think would want it and just haven't seen it yet."

Jordan Steffen said that good journalism often serves a "utilitarian purpose," adding that journalists should report on what people need to know. So if the public needs to know how the local court system works, that's what reporters should be writing stories about. To Steffen, that audience knowledge is a part of good journalism. Sacha Evans agreed, noting that one of her main goals in communication consultation is to help organizations find a path "where they're going to speak to their audience in a way that resonates."

Although several journalists and communication professionals seemed to agree that audience engagement could be a step in solving general communication issues, this change would require both the journalism and nonprofit fields to alter the way they view their communication structures.

Shift of Journalistic Priorities

The journalists noted that, in order to improve the depth and scope of news reporting, certain changes need to occur in the field overall. For instance, according to Joy Mayer, if journalists take a step back from the lack of resources and the intensity of the news cycle and ask themselves why they choose to cover each story, they will think more about what they want to tell their communities and therefore end up reporting and writing in a way that provides deeper context and relevance for the community members.

According to Joey Bunch and Ann Schimke, much of the problem is that the journalism industry is losing resources, and newsrooms are still trying to figure out how to reallocate the resources they already have to create more thorough stories. Schimke said that her independent news organization Chalkbeat partnered with the Denver Post to address this problem after the Post lost an education reporter: “They use a lot of our content, and they reprint it in the digital and sometimes in the print edition. So I kind of feel like that’s a way for them to still have in-depth stories without necessarily having the resources to produce those stories.” In this way, larger news organizations can partner with smaller, independent media in order to provide deeper, niche-oriented content to a wider variety of readers.

Joey Bunch also discussed that the lack of resources has an effect on the field, but he said that news organizations have to refocus their attention on telling fair, accurate

stories with the resources they have. He also acknowledged that, because of the dwindling resources, reporters have to be pickier about the kinds of stories they tell. “We barely have the resources to cover the presidential race,” said Bunch, “so if a nonprofit has a story to tell, it better be a good one.” He emphasized the fact that the field doesn’t have enough time or money to interpret and tell the stories of nonprofit organizations that can’t communicate their own story in a grasping way. This concludes that, while journalism may need to be restructured to tell more in-depth, contextualized stories, nonprofit organizations should also focus their attention on enhancing communication strategies.

Refocusing Nonprofit Communications

Several of the nonprofit communications professionals said that, as discussed briefly under the third research question, organizations often focus on the short-term, event-oriented aspects of communication instead of working to inform the public of the overall societal issues the organizations are working to address. “For instance,” Amy Callahan said, “if they’re having a fundraising gala to provide operational support for their nonprofit... what they do often times is say, ‘We’re having this fundraiser. Oh and by the way, this is what we do.’” Callahan thinks this should be the other way around; nonprofits should talk about what they do in the community at large, and then discuss an upcoming fundraising event.

Sacha Evans agreed, and she discussed the logistics of changing the way that nonprofits communicate as fundamental to her job at DG+CO. In an ideal world, she said, nonprofits become the leading experts in the issue they’re working on, and they can relay stories through the media about the social problems and solutions they encounter. Evans and her team create strategic communications plans to help organizations get in touch

with their audience, find out what messages they want to get across, and implement a more structured system to look past the day-to-day events and into a larger organizational strategy. While this could look different for each organization, as some may need advocacy campaigns while others need digital media support, the end goal is changing the fundamental basis of communication in the nonprofit sector.

Journalist and Nonprofit Collaboration

Perhaps one of the most prevalent solutions discussions by both journalists and nonprofit staff members was the creation of some sort of channel through which both fields could come together in order to better address each party's needs. "I think people have inherently stronger ties when they come together in person," said Samantha McCann. "So connecting those players with journalists who are interested in reporting these stories from a really rigorous angle, I think everyone, their guard isn't up as much."

In an attempt to brainstorm ways that these meetings could come about, Joy Mayer said that if newsrooms could invest in a sort of training program that invited organizations to attend seminars on how best to pitch and present stories, the community at large could increase their "media literacy." Jordan Steffen says this goal could be reached with active discussion and listening by both parties; "It involves a lot of being open minded on both sides, listening to what the reporter is asking for and then vice-versa, listening to what an agency or a nonprofit is trying to explain," she said.

Amy Callahan suggested a similar solution, but she imagined a third-party organization, like a benefit corporation ("B-Corp"), that could convene journalists and nonprofits to work together to understand solutions journalism and what it means to tell a rigorous, compelling story. Not only could this improve the same media literacy to

which Mayer referred, but it could also help the nonprofit sector better attract donors who wish to contribute to a positive social cause. Of course, this isn't an immediate goal of journalists, but, according to these communication professionals, increased dialogue between these two parties could result in positive outcomes for both.

Results and Conclusions

Overall, the interviewees provide an in-depth look at the day-to-day and big-picture interactions between nonprofit organizations and journalists, as well as with improvements that could be made in the inter-field communication. Research Question One poses the question, ‘How have journalists traditionally interacted with nonprofit organizations?’ In order to answer this, we must understand a combination of the academic research and the interviewee responses. We can conclude that nonprofit organizations and journalists have traditionally wanted different outcomes from their communication, leading to tension between the two sectors. In large part, this problem can be attributed to the cyclical coverage of problem-oriented stories by journalists, a practice rooted in traditional watchdog journalism that has contributed to problems in the nonprofit field such as the “overhead myth.” However, nonprofit organizations have also contributed to the tensions between the two fields, as they focus primarily on pitching event-based stories with relatively little substance, making it harder for journalists to report an in-depth look at the societal issues nonprofits are trying to solve.

In the interviews, journalists said nonprofit organizations often demonstrated expertise within their fields, making them knowledgeable sources on specific social issues. Though the journalists had mixed reactions about personal relationships with different nonprofits, there was also an air of hesitancy around the interactions between the members of both fields, as journalists noticed that, often times, nonprofits were wary about speaking with journalists for fear of being portrayed negatively. Though journalists acknowledged the importance of talking to nonprofits in stories in which they could provide valuable information, a couple of journalists also said that they rarely covered

stories specifically about nonprofit organizations. Nonprofit staff members similarly discussed a sense of discomfort in their conversations with the press. They noted that, because of the history of negative news coverage of the nonprofit sector, they distrust the media and are discontent with the stories that feature their sector. These nonprofit professionals said that this discontent stemmed from the focus of journalists on problem-based stories, whereas communication staff members in the nonprofit field tried to avoid negative news coverage. These interviewees noted that, while they wish journalists would focus more on the social issues their organizations are trying to solve, they also understand that nonprofit communications need to improve in order to facilitate this process.

In response to the fourth and final research question, all of the interviewees agreed that there is a need in the communications field to focus on solution-based stories within the community. And while several journalists and nonprofit professionals emphasized that the specific genre of solutions journalism itself may not be the only answer to their interaction issues, the values and qualities it presents to the communications world could be used to tell more quality, in-depth, and community-building stories. Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of this research is the scope of solutions these professionals offered that didn't fall under any of the posed research questions. It was inspiring to see the willingness the interviewees had to criticize themselves and their fields for the sake of creating ideas that could improve communications between their sectors. Among the posed solutions were increasing engagement with audiences; shifting priorities of news organizations away from short, choppy coverage and toward more in-depth community-based pieces; altering nonprofit communication to focus more on their societal benefits

than on day-to-day events; and creating a network that allowed journalists and nonprofit staff members to participate in workshops and conversations that could bridge the gap in communication knowledge and goals between the two fields. So what does this research mean? Both nonprofit staff members and journalists acknowledged that the interactions between the two fields have room for improvement. Each side offered ideas that communications fields could incorporate to create more in-depth, solutions-based research and writing. Solutions journalism has a growing place in the communications world that could alter the way nonprofit organizations and journalists tell stories. But communications professionals could also use techniques of audience engagement and collaboration between fields to improve their dialogue.

Moving forward, this research is valuable to the journalism industry and nonprofit sector as a whole, as it can provide an outline for conversations to be had about tactics to improve communication. It's also important to put solutions journalism into the context of specific fields so as to analyze how this newly termed genre of journalism could affect varying sectors in different ways. However, this is by no means the end of the conversation. This research only looks at a handful of communications professionals, so further research could improve upon this study by including a larger, more representational population of professionals across both fields. Further research about this topic should also target readers of nonprofit stories in order to see the issues from a consumption side along with the production aspects. I hope this research can spark a conversation between communications professionals to help steer the industry away from problem-oriented communication and toward a deeper, more contextualized way of telling stories.

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