

Focusing on Solutions



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Our journalists and politicians know how to talk about problems. Turn on the news, open the paper, and you'll find countless pieces dramatizing the many crises, local and global, that threaten to engulf us. As a result, we know about some of the challenges we face: climate change, unemployment, crime, terrorism, environmental degradation, substandard education and an energy crisis, to name a few. We know much less about potential solutions, however, especially those that go beyond narrow, technical fixes. And the less we know, the less likely we are to act, and the less able we will be to effect the change we need.

In a well-functioning democracy, citizens must have forums in which they can not only identify public problems and air public grievances, but also come together to discuss solutions. On a local level, some such forums still exist: in New England's town meetings, for instance, citizens still gather to compare and debate solutions to municipal problems. And in Britain and other European countries, the government ensures that a certain amount of television airtime is used for public education.¹ But in the US, on a national level, the public conversation is decidedly crisis-focused, with the majority of the media privately owned and profit driven.² As media outlets compete for ratings, and as reporters compete for scarce work, only those who can attract attention survive. The it-bleeds-it-leads approach may win ratings, but it contributes to public cynicism and fatigue.

In fact, studies have shown that TV news viewers leave the typical news program feeling anxious and depressed, and are much more likely to catastrophize personal worries.³ Other studies have found that reading negative newspaper articles can create

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exaggerated feelings of distrust that extend beyond the content of the story.⁴

But with the massive growth of the blogosphere in recent years, media is changing. The Internet, unlike television, has no major technological or financial barriers to entry, and thus creates a more decentralized and two-directional communication structure. It gives users more control over the distribution of information and allows a message previously overseen by a few media corporations to be shaped by the entire population.

The Internet "allows citizens to gain knowledge about what is done in their name, just as politicians can find out more about those they claim to represent."⁵ It does more than just disseminate information; it lets voters talk back. It therefore creates new opportunities for communities to share stories and solutions, ranging from local to global, in ways that were once impossible. WiserEarth, a social networking site that helps people working toward social justice, indigenous rights and environmental stewardship connect, collaborate and share knowledge, has created a solutions directory accessible to all. This directory allows the public to share solutions from within their communities so they can be duplicated elsewhere in the world. The site features over 112,000 civil society organizations in 243 countries and territories.

Similar initiatives have sprung up in recent years. Dowser, a new media organization launched in 2010, reports on social innovation, using case studies and interviews to

address the question "Who is solving what and how?"; and the Good News Network posts daily about positive solutions-focused news from around the world. It also encourages authors and readers to collaborate to promote positive change. Says founder Geri Weis, "We need to be informed by a world view that is not dripping with sensationalism and attuned to the police scanner."⁶

Solutions is a hybrid academic journal/popular magazine, launched at the beginning of 2010, that showcases innovative ideas for solving the world's interconnected economic, environmental and political problems. The journal is designed to serve as a starting point for a more constructive and inclusive conversation—a new kind of town meeting in which academics, policy-makers and the informed public can discuss and explore solutions and develop shared visions of the future.

As a brief illustration of this new model of journalism, let's take a look at Appalachia. It's a special place—culturally rich and biologically diverse. But many of us associate it with the problems facing its poorest communities: unemployment, poverty and lagging education. Resource extraction, especially mountaintop removal mining—the practice of using explosives to remove the tops of the region's mountains to more easily reach coal deposits—has devastated both the environment and public health. The rubble is dumped into valleys where it chokes waterways. Native forests are destroyed, and mining wastes are responsible for polluting the groundwater. Tensions are rising between residents who oppose this practice and those whose livelihoods depend on coal mining.

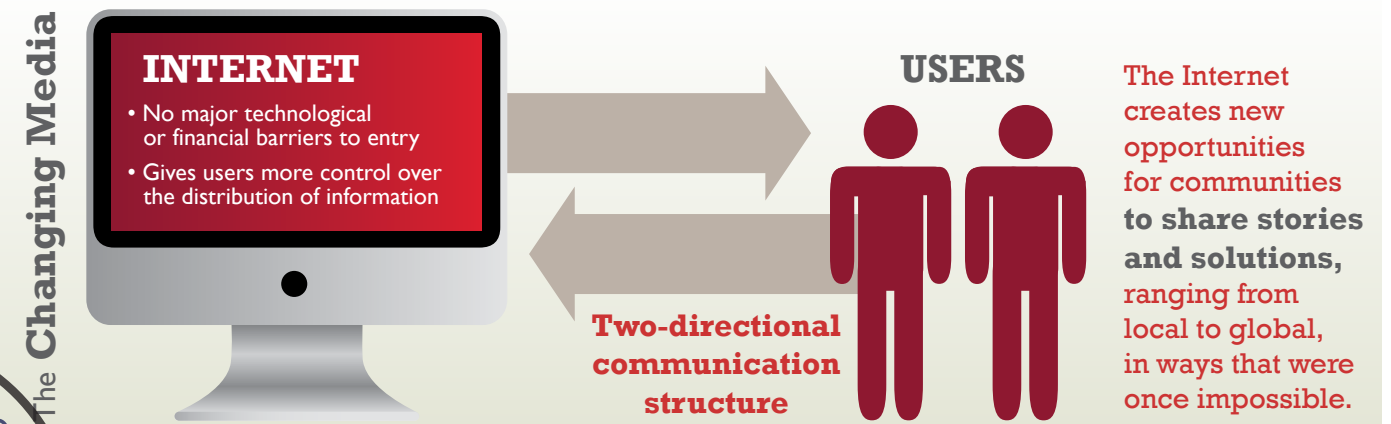




Photo courtesy The News Hour with Jim Lehrer
Jim Lehrer on the set of The News Hour on PBS. Americans named PBS the most trusted, least biased nationally known institution.



Photo courtesy US Force photo/Master Sgt. Stan Parker
Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Norton Schwartz answers questions during an interview with Lara Logan from 60 Minutes.

More Good News

For many people, independent media is the go-to place for fair and balanced news reporting. But independent media outlets aren't the only ones getting it right. More and more programs are popping up in the mainstream media that air compelling, useful news that's making a difference.

NBC News Education Nation

"Education Nation" was a weeklong national broadcast event with a focus on improving education in America. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Harlem Children Zone's CEO Geoffrey Canada, along with other policymakers, educators, members of the business community, and engaged citizens came together for a two-day summit in Rockefeller Plaza to discuss America's education system. For the entire week a variety of NBC programs broadcast stories on the challenges, opportunities and success stories in education in the US with the goal of inspiring "lasting and positive improvements in our educational system."¹

CBS 60 Minutes

The investigative reporting news magazine program, *60 Minutes* does not simply regurgitate the facts. The program does its own investigations and follows up on investigations done by national newspapers and other sources. Many stories focus on allegations of wrongdoing and corruption on the part of corporations, politicians, and other public officials. The show also features celebrity biographies and profiles of people who have accomplished a heroic action or efforts to improve the world. In addition to informing the public, the program has influenced policy and exposed previously hidden truths.²

PBS NewsHour

Aired on public television, there are no commercials in this hour-long news program. After a brief summary of the headline, *PBS NewsHour* dives in to three or four of the headline events in-depth with 10 to 15 segments on each. The segments include discussions with experts, newsmakers, and/or commentators. Jim Lehrer, co-owner and anchor, created a unique list of 10 guidelines for ethical reporting including, "Cover, write, and present every story with the care I would want if the story were about me" and "Assume personal lives are a private matter until a legitimate turn in the story absolutely mandates otherwise."³

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Coverage of the West Virginia mining tragedy only reinforced the region's troubled public image. But there is also a different conversation under way in Appalachia—a conversation that gets much less attention from conventional media. Many groups—private and public, local and regional—are working to create a new, more diverse and more sustainable local economy by reforesting barren mine lands, reclaiming rivers and streams, developing renewable energy industries and supporting the region's many entrepreneurs.

Solutions wanted to expand this conversation, include more voices and give it a wider regional and national audience. Its editors asked academics, activists and non-profit leaders who have spent their lives working to create solutions for Appalachia to help us imagine coal country's future beyond coal. The result was a special issue with 87 pages of ideas for a more prosperous, more sustainable Appalachia. In essence, it's a playbook for the region: a set of solutions that will focus and motivate future action.

Hearing about solutions can be empowering. And, critically, it can also be contagious: It can start conversations and inspire action. Michael Gleich, founder of the innovative German-based Advanced Journalism Academy, argues for the value, in a time of media sensationalism, of what he calls "constructive journalism." His organization has trained hundreds of journalists in conflicts areas, like Sri Lanka and Rwanda, to find and report on local peacemakers. His success has led

him to believe that there is a market for solutions-oriented journalism. Says Gleich, "I became aware that in all conflict areas known only for disaster and death there were intelligent, creative and courageous people working on peace processes. They seemed to be 'unknown heroes' because their stories were hardly covered by mainstream media." He adds, "Constructive journalism is an important additional viewpoint. It completes the picture."⁷

Johan Galtung founded TRANSCEND International, which, through the TRANSCEND media service, explores and supports the field of peace journalism. This field asks journalists to present the root causes of a conflict, give voice to all affected parties and report on ideas for conflict resolution as well as success stories and post-war developments. Galtung compares human conflicts to epidemics. If a disease were to break out in our country, we'd want our journalists to do more than simply tally the death count. We'd want them to offer a diagnosis, explain the causes of the outbreak and, most importantly, report on a cure. Says Galtung, "To say that violence is the only thing that sells is to insult humanity."⁸

Focusing on solutions does not mean ignoring problems or dismissing the obstacles that stand in the way of change. This new trend in media is not a quest for cure-alls. Rather, it is an invitation to thoughtful conversation and collaborative consensus-building. Both are essential steps toward effective action.

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from the editor

