Module 4: Interview with Swati Sanyal Tarafdar

[00:00:12] **Speaker 1** Headlines. His stories on epidemics and systemic issues can be found in seconds all over the world. But reporting on ways to improve those conditions is rare. As David Bornstein, co-founder of the Solutions Journalism Network, coined the problem scream. But the solutions whisperer, Bornstein said that the journalists have as much of a duty to report on possible solutions as they have to report on the problems themselves. So, I'd like to start the conversation with The Solutions Whisperer. Tell us about the importance of wrestling editorial decisions, in part sometimes affected by budget pressures in choosing whether to cover, say, another crime story versus looking at covering the solutions to that problem.

[00:01:01] **Speaker 2** Oh, I'm so glad you asked this question here because this has been an ongoing challenge for all the newsrooms that I work on. Every time I picked up a story to cover or approach. But I see that given the examples and case studies that we have so far on how solutions journalism makes an impact and how it has been a solution to the revenue problems that all small newsrooms and even the larger ones face these days. So, revenue stories, revenue success, stories of solutions. Journalism has shown that newsrooms can go independent on solutions journalism which will be told which is an issue to cover. So, I would say that problems will be there. We have traditionally covered problems, but we focus on solutions journalism. There is a lot more to give to several audiences. They are looking for positive information. They want to contribute in many cases. For example, when you are covering climate and a lot of doom and gloom happens because the audience feels that we cannot do anything about this, it's a huge problem in larger organizations. Governments have to work in those areas. So, when we cover climate solutions just so we can show what little people are doing and how what the big impacts those are making are. So that certainly gives a lot of hope. And the people cling to it, the people accept it, embrace it. And that's a huge thing for journalism at this stage. IP.

[00:02:52] **Speaker 1** Tell us a little bit about understanding the response versus solution, and that failed solutions also get reported in solutions journalism. You say it's a mindset and we need and we don't need to spend weeks on delivering solutions journalism.

[00:03:12] **Speaker 2** Yeah, this is one of the questions that journalists ask when they are starting working on this individualism, is that can we cover or report on a solution that didn't work? And I think the bigger issue here is to understand what the solutions are, what solutions and solutions just that for. It's a response that we have developed the problem and that looks like some systematic changes that can be replicable in other situations where people have similar kinds of problems and it can happen. I think it's a response. So, it can be experimental and experiments sometimes fail, but that doesn't mean that we can't learn anything from those experiments. Those are the major features in all aspects of our lives. So yes, there are solutions. The responses that have not worked out the way people anticipated make great solutions to these ideas should become law, because then we approach the four pillars of solutions journalism instead stories. We look at the digital responses. We look at the evidence of the impact. We look at the limitations, most importantly, and the insights that we have gathered from the solutions. It teaches a lot, and maybe communities in other parts of the world would find a solution to those limitations and be able to replicate that same solution for the same problem in the most accessible way. So yes, the solutions do get reported as solutions to them. I think it's a very important part of solutions journalism and when it comes to the time needed, are the efforts needed for making solutions journalism work or reporting solutions stories? I would say that solutions journalism is a mindset and like any other kind of mindset that we have, we can

work on it. And experts are saying that we need 21 days to work on it, we need 60 days to work on it. But this is workable, this is functional. You can upgrade your mindset. And then we work on solutions journalism as a mindset. You start identifying stories, posture, and you start, you know, where to look for that evidence, to look for the limitations, what kind of questions to ask for those you work faster, it gets into your system. You kind of approach your journalism in a different way than you are doing now in the case of traditional journalism. So, when you start working on solutions, there is a bit more focus. You get deeper into the stories and you keep doing that story of the story. So, unfortunately, video. So, stories do take a lot of time, but mostly you can do solutions, and journalism stories in your regular beat, and you can deliver a story every 2 to 3, even daily, depending on what you are covering. So, I think that helps you go.

[00:06:24] **Speaker**. You know, I agree that one of the one of the barriers that journalists face in considering covering solutions journalism is that it will take long to do this with journalism. And there are many different ways, as you said, to change a mindset and what a solutions journalism story is, and how long it takes. One of the things that you talk about is the two most important parts of weaving solutions journalism into our work that's slicing the problem thinner, which makes it easier for a journalistic to wrap their figurative arms around a social problem and understanding at what point we can do solutions journalism. What are your thoughts on that?

[00:07:07] **Speaker 2** Yeah, that's a great question. We go because we encounter these domain issues. When journalists start working on the solutions, some stories and projects. Most of a lot of overwhelm like what do we do? Where are the solutions? And we have to remind them that, you know, first you have to slice the stories, the niche things. And that has been an ongoing learning for a lot of us, especially those who freelance,

because we have to learn to slice our stories because when we have a larger chunk of it, it's a pain. And we don't just sit in pitching it or getting a commission on it. So that's a very crucial part that all journalists should focus on, and it becomes all the more important when we're looking at solutions journalism because suppose we are looking at quality, and as we mentioned earlier, that solutions journalism doesn't give you the ability not only it's not a proposal on a plate or it's not a whimsical painting. So, you have to have something that works. And how do we go about in poverty as a big problem cannot be solved in itself? So how can we slice the problem of poverty, you know, maybe across communities, across what are the tags that come with the poverty, livelihood generation, income generation, habitat loss, where people have to move away from their land and the loss of, they lose their livelihoods, things like that. And then we look at each of these problems and figure out, okay, what are the problems? And if anybody is doing better, writing their own those problems. So how they are overcoming if somebody has solved a problem, how they're doing it. So, we look at the very smaller chunks of those big problems, and often we get this kind of information from people who are working with them, from angles, from scientists and researchers, from government officials, and a lot of experts who are working around those issues. So, once we start slicing our stories thinner, it helps us to get deeper into the story and then easily map out the evidence and the limitations of those responses that are happening. Does that make sense?

[00:09:41] **Speaker**. Absolutely. Let's look. One of the things that you mention is about the three phases of a solutions journalism workstream. Planning, executing and processing the story. And you have a video story that is a case in point of how a simple rainwater management system transformed a semi-arid village in Rajasthan, India. Tell us about an

outline you use as a simple brainstorming tool that keeps that you use in all stages of working on a solutions journalism piece.

[00:10:25] **Speaker 2** Yeah. So, I have my way of working into a solution story. And it might differ from person to person, journalists or journalists of me to read. What I do is like getting to research papers and journal published journals, peer review journals, to look for things that are happening. Which leads me, isn't it, to the evidence part of the story? So, my kind of work takes a lot of pre-planning before I go into the mode. So, when I talk about building solutions into the workflow, three main things that jump up to me is like the pre-planning part, which is a very important part of my way of working. It reduces the timeline very much. Then the next part is the execution part. Then you go into the field. Of course, we go verbose events and we go into the field keeping in mind that we can be involved, there can be surprises and we're open to those. The next is the processing part of this. Like when we come back to the field, then depending on what kind of stories we are producing is a tech story or a month we do a story or a video story, we kind of try to brainstorm what we have and how we structure it to make the story the most engaging. So, if I go to this story that I did with your story that I did on the story of this tiny village. The leak that you were seeing now, wasn't there, a few decades ago? In fact, until the mid 1990s, this village looked completely different from what you see now. This is La Perea, a village in the district of Rajasthan, the desert state of India. Like its neighbors in this dry and semi-arid region, this village does have scanty, scrubby vegetation and little surface water. Data from the 1990s suggests there's some 189 households living here at the time. They majorly practiced agriculture and animal husbandry for livelihood. Villagers grew drought resistant crops such as rocket salad or arugula, locally called taro Mino. They also grew some Jabbar, chickpeas and millets. The two months and months of July and August brought rain and relief that the people looked forward to during the rest of the projects that have worked or that are being done all over the country in India regarding groundwater replenishment. And I found this story in the mentions. It's not a story from the time. It was a project that somebody is supporting eventually because there has been some promise. And when I looked into it, that was a project paper published by an organization, and it was their annual meeting document that I was looking into. So, when they found a mention of a project like that, I was very curious. And then they started finding like, what is the response? What did people do? And if there are any scientific evidence on the system that has been devised this way. And luckily, I found a place in India that has been working on this particular response for the last 3 to 4 years, maybe a little more. So, then I had my response and I had my evidence of published papers from this scientist. So, when I read through those papers and I tried to contact the scientist, I tried to get in touch with the people in those villages, it was difficult because it was a remote village. But and this was a collaborative story. So, I was working with another journalist. I had to find him as I'm treating him on solutions, on the fundamentals. And then I did this free planning before sending the reporter out into the field. So, this preplanning mostly involved identifying the story and then, you know, finding most of the evidence. And when you talk to the scientist, of course, he gives out, you know, the way scientists work. There are a lot of assumptions. And then there are cases when you relax those assumptions and the solutions fell through. So those are my limitations. So, it was easy comparatively to identify once they identified the story and then the people, I need to talk to cover the remaining pillars of the solutions story. And it's comparatively easier for me to look into the evidence and the limitations. And so, it became my part of the preplanning stage before somebody went out in the field to cover this story. I needed somebody to go out and see when this system is functioning. So, this was the time of the year when they had to go. So, all this became easier for me to manage because I had a very strong pre-planning done at an earlier stage. So, the rest of the story was very simple. The reporter knew that this was a window, this two weeks in

which they have to go and visit this village because that is dying. The rays would be there, the charcoal, the shallow trenches the villagers devised to collect the rainwater so that in succeeding to the water so that it would be functional. So, when the when they actually spend it on how they bring it on to people and instead in interviews and we know it's a game, but it was it's a video story, took a little longer for me to produce, to process and produce, but otherwise everything was in place. So, this is how it is. I know that when you talk about the people in project, there's a lot of effort that goes into it and there's a lot of anxiety that a lot of these reporters might not be able to indulge in because they have certain deliverables, they have certain goals to believe all this, actually. So, but then if you are on the lookout, you have developed the mindset for it and then look, you know where to look for those stories. You gradually get that intuitive hits like, okay, let me look into as I saw this annual meeting document from an organization, from a semi-government organization. So, this way you know where to look. And then you dig deeper and you find what is in there. And even if it is like something that they say didn't work, somebody tried something a little. But still, it is a story. So, you can find building blocks and evidence. And one way, like you mentioned data, we mentioned journalism, sorry, we mentioned journalists, published journalism. But in the absence of this. If you need evidence, what do I do? Suppose I didn't have this dentist working on this particular project. I would have probably just visited the place and see for myself what happened. How would they have devised and designed this child's interest? And if it is working, I would have spoken with a lot of people. Currently my story. I had to reduce it. Doesn't have a lot of third-party vibes. Also, because my assignment is the evidence and limitations from the scientist that I speak to feel very strong. But if I didn't have that part of the evidence, I would have needed to speak with a lot of people who are not directly involved in the making of the changes, but who are benefiting, who are witnessing the changes that have happened over the 30 years there. So those people, those soundbites would become my evidence. So, evidence is a very important part of solutions which makes the associations. So, we have this investigative aspect into it. So that is a way of dealing with my extreme. But I don't suggest to anyone solutions realism. Take a little bit of work then you are starting on. Well, it's every planning, but it really pays off and it can help reduce the cost, the budgets, the time budgets as well. And you can do a little faster.

[00:20:05] **Speaker 1** I really love your brainstorming tool. I think it really helps identify the solutions journalism story. And as you said, it really also helps in the planning of the solutions journalism story so that it is easier to a certain degree to execute. And really when you're working in a collaborative environment, as most newsrooms are, of course, planning is key to success. An Associated Press study found that young adults experience news fatigue and an apathetic reaction towards negative news. NEWSROOM managers play an important role in the creation of solutions journalism stories, incentivizing reporters and giving them more time to work on these stories. I'm hoping you can provide advice in creating a type of environment in the newsroom that supports solutions journalism. You have an example of a climate solution story that talks about the changing of what you mentioned earlier gloom and doom attitude that so many audiences are just tired of.

[00:21:20] **Speaker 2** So on the one hand, you look at it you go is like traditional journalism or problem Finding journalism. The way we have done so far is one part of the circle, one arc of the solution solutions journalism in a way that it takes us journalists as well as the audience beyond the problem. I tell you, like when I when I meet people in the villages and the coastal planes where I work, mostly, I'm a social justice journalist. They talk to me about their problems, but then they say, but these are problems. We have been facing this for so long. What happens? What is the point telling you? Because there is no solution. Nobody does anything about it. And then when you talk to them about like, okay, you

know, do you know somebody who has done something about it and something happened? Or maybe sometimes they say, you know, these problems were there, but now last six months, we are doing something and this has changed. So, you know, there's a huge difference in the energy of the stories of the or the people I work with. And this comes over to the audience and. I think when you're talking about how to take this forward, take this journalism forward. I lost it again so often to them, so many, I think when you ask the question was more aggressive. And I also am I this is happening because there's a point I missed earlier. So, if you want, I can tackle it first because I know of it because we are. I missed it. And it's constantly nagging me. So, you asked me about the two major aspects that we should tackle when we are meeting those issues and journalism and do our work. I spoke about one problem with just slicing the story thinner. I talk about at what stage. So, Jewel has to be implemented. Do you want me to cover that?

[00:23:38] **Speaker 1** Yes. Yes, please.

[00:23:40] **Speaker 2** There are a lot of journeys to stumble, and this is more prominent for journalists who have been in the industry working for quite some time is like then. Know that we have known about solutions journalism. Is that all? We don't need to become journalism again. Everything else was, like, obsolete. So, we say, no, that is very much needed. The old, the traditional, the watchdog journalism is very much needed. We still need IT solutions. Journalism has its spot in the news cycle. Do you get it? I suppose there is a thorny problem that have been going on in the community, for example, regarding, again, drinking water contamination. So, when you are a newsroom working on this, working with the audience in this community, the audience is already aware of this problem. And what they're looking for is like, what is the solution? What can we do about this? Why is not the government not working on it? Why are the NGOs are working on it? So, there's a lot of questions, frustration, anger in it. Then we find out if somebody somewhere is doing something to work on this problem. Is there a solution? Is it a response, an issue that can be covered? That is something the audience absorbs. The audience loves it because now they have a solution. They have something to hope for. They can think of doing something to solve their own problems. And this is where solutions journalism works better. But consider that a community in the last two months have come across something related to the drinking water contamination. Arsenic contamination is pretty common in India. So, it was very recently. And the. The audience is not exactly aware of what is going on. Solutions Journalism doesn't really work at that stage because the first step there is to talk about the problem as something that is happening, something that is bothering the community. So once the awareness has been in the bones, the audience understands that there is a problem and they need to work on it or they need to find a solution to their bothered about this problem. The solution is and then starts working because then the newsroom can suggest that, okay, we are having this problem and there are different parts of the country or different communities that have tackled the same problem. By doing this, this, this is this. So, we get into the usual fear of the evidence and the limitations and the insights that we have from those responses. So, what do you mean to say by this? Is that what stage the audience is in when it comes to the news item or the issues or the problems that we're going to talk about or those solutions that you are going to provide? That is very important in deciding whether to do a solution story or a simple emotional story.

[00:27:06] **Speaker 1** An Associated Press study found that young adults experienced news fatigue and apathetic reaction towards negative news. NEWSROOM managers play an important role in the creation of solutions stories, incentivizing reporters and giving them more time to work on those stories. I'm hoping you can provide advice in creating a

type of environment in the newsroom that supports solutions Journalism story. You have an example of a climate solution story that's a good in regards to how solutions journalism can change this gloom and doom attitude that so many audiences are just tired of.

[00:27:50] **Speaker 2** Absolutely. So, you know, the way I see it is the watchdog journalism of the tradition of journalism as one part of this is the first arc of the circle that has been covered. Solutions is a big step forward over the entire circle. So, as we need that watchdog journalism, we similarly need the solutions journalism aspect of it, which is the whole circle now. What happens, I think correctly say that most services are telling people have stopped reading news. People have stopped engaging with news because what is there in the news, this all negativity, this all things that they cannot do anything about. Bigger issues that normal people, common people cannot really do anything about. They cannot solve it. They cannot contribute to any solution. Take, for example, the climate report. Does we know about the global warming. We know what is happening. We know about the loss of biodiversity. We know about the warming weather, the sea water rise. But then what do we do? So, when we talk about. What is going wrong and then focus on that. People are doing these things to build resilience, to combat things, to adapt and adjust to the changing climate. It gives people a lot of hope. So, is there anything that people are doing to avoid or prevent fire? Is there anything that people are doing to fight against hunger? I would think people are doing to. I suppose a bit more resilience, very enterprise, so that that can be grown in the salty, salty soil, the sea that's coming, for example, the bottom of the ocean. A lot of work is happening in those areas in building resilience. So, when we talk about these stories, people automatically get engaged and it's not the doom and gloom. Reporter It is more of an it's not even a sloppy report, which I would like to mention here. It's not fluffy, it's not just felt good because we're backing the stories. We're talking about evidence. You're giving detailed work on the responses, what people are doing, and then we're telling, okay, this are the results, these other impacts that are coming in. So, this solution focused responses and we're also talking about limitations, which gives a lot of trust, which builds a lot of trust by the audience when they see that we are not just talking about the good things that we are also talking about and also which are not. I've got easy stuff. So, people go to bed if they have to have to. The solution to another community, another region. People there would know what band or what can feel. What is the potential of difficulties that might the solution might come in when they can take care of that. So, this is how, you know, we can come we can actually get over the. So, people that have already been in the newsroom and the audience. So, solutions journalism is proving to be much use and it's a huge solution to building back your audience. Television journalism completes the cycle. So, in the NEWSROOM. When we have a group of people working towards a particular niche, a particular need, or there's a focus on developing, as we see for many smaller newsrooms since days. The questions we should be asking to install this particular solution as a mindset is. We have problems. How can we complete this idea? Solutions. Are there any responses people are providing? Is there something happening? Any research that is happening? Any potential solution that peoples are working on? So, we just don't stop looking at the problems. We have those problems and then we try to look into what is being done for all those smaller problems. And so, when we find something being done, something that can be companies and solutions. And so, the point is we have the problems for a long while. It's not just one year to year. It's been there for ages. Look at the SDGs. So, if you go with the Sustainable Development Goals and look at all those goals that we have and map it according to your team or your focus. Got them. Slice them. Looking to the solutions. Looking at the data. We look at what people are doing. Which communities are tackling those problems better? Are there any community that has changed their rough? So, once we start looking at what is being done there, the solutions, we start finding signature stories. And when we talk to

people, when we talk to our spokespersons, when we talk to our resource, people keep asking them what is working. Okay, we have this problem. This has been established. We have the data for this. Is there any hope any here? Is there anybody working towards solving this problem? Is there any potential research going on? Is there some pilot project going on in Climate Solutions? We are also considering pilot projects for solutions of stories. So, looking to those, stretch those to stretch your questions, go deeper into those finding solutions. If you find if you look for solutions that will find them. That is the point which Derek also mentioned and like you mentioned, is same as a solutions whisperer. So, I think this is how we do it forward in the newsrooms. We just keep on pushing the boundaries and try to complete the circle.

[00:34:56] **Speaker 1** I completely agree. Right. So, I think one of the things that you shared that I think is so important is to be transparent, and that is demystifying the newsgathering process for audiences to let them know what's working, what's not working, and tell them along the way is really building, rebuilding, trust between the audience and media. And I think it also helps them better understand a social problem that's just that the community is trying to figure out in obviously what the community can do to demand better from there, from government, from those in power. We've talked about the solutions journalism whisperer. We've talked about weaving solutions journalism into our workflow, including the three Faces of Solutions journalism Workstream This is solutions, journalism, new ways of elevating your reporting, engaging audiences. Our special guest speaker today, Swati Sanyal, that of DA Solutions Journalism Network, lead fellow based in India. Thank you so much for helping us better understand how to build solutions journalism into our workflow. So, I do. Thank you.

[00:36:23] **Speaker 2** Oh, it was lovely to be here. Thank you so much. You.