

2023-2024

REVENUE BEACON COHORT

HOW FIVE NEWSROOMS TIED SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM TO NEW DOLLARS

OVERVIEW

Audiences want solutions journalism. In survey after survey, the public expresses a strong desire for stories that examine what's working, not just what's wrong. The latter feed news fatigue, causing people to tune out. Adding solutions journalism to the mix provides clear-eyed but hopeful stories that draw people back in. And that can lead to revenue, too, right? We know that's true, but the path from story to financial support is not straightforward. As newsrooms work to build sustainable business models, there's a lot to learn — and no easy road to success.

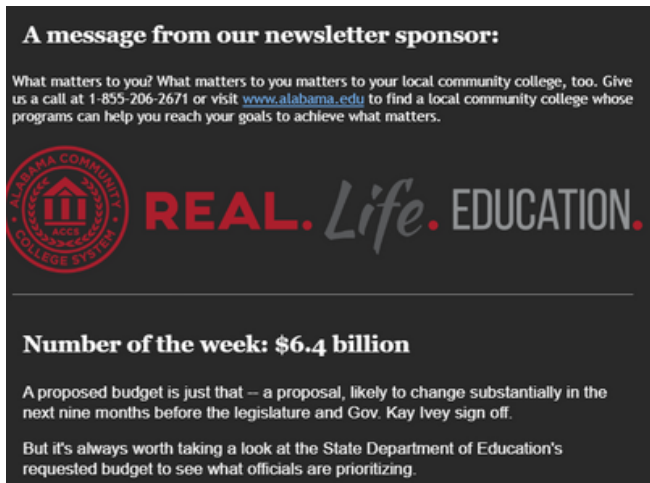
That said, many newsrooms are forging paths forward, including five that we supported in 2024 to create new solutions journalism-based products through listening, prototyping and testing, with lots of pivots along the way.

These five innovative and creative newsrooms — AL.com, Civil Eats, The Dallas Morning News, The Keene Sentinel and WSHU — dreamed big, but realistically. They did the hard work of building new connections between their business and newsroom colleagues. They overcame naysayers and honed their pitches, sometimes more than once. They tried one idea, then switched to another when the first one wasn't working.

The end result was five great projects, which are already starting to bring in dollars. Even more impressive, these journalists found a wonderful nexus between content that benefits their communities and their bottom lines. Below are highlights of what they did and what they learned. You can find fuller case studies on each of the newsrooms here.

Linda Shaw,
SJN director of beacons and advanced practice

AL.com



Goal: To raise money to support The Alabama Education Lab, an initiative that embeds solutions journalism into our coverage of public K-12 schools.

What We Did: Pitched sponsorships for an education newsletter that features our solutions content and looks at big trends in education. We also pitched sponsors on a series of stories that highlight the methods used by some of Alabama's most

successful teachers, illustrating those approaches in ways others can emulate.


Results to date: A \$15,000, six-month sponsorship for one of Education Lab's two newsletters.

What's next? Seeking renewal of the six-month education newsletter sponsorship. While we missed our internal deadline for selling the teacher series this year, we hope to do a similar project in 2025 and sell it then.

One highlight: We received our first sponsorship for an Education Lab newsletter, the first success as we pioneer a path to raising money for AL.com's news coverage. AL.com's sales department is great at selling sponsorships for sports or entertainment products, but this was a first for news.

One tip: Force yourself to talk about not what you think is cool, but the impact you want to have and how you are going to make sure something tangible happens. This is true internally as well as externally.

Civil Eats



Our independent, investigative journalism about the U.S. food system is supported by members and donors like you.


[Become a Member for \\$5/mo.](#)

Check Out Our New Crash Course

We are excited to announce our first-ever **Crash Course: Climate Solutions in Food & Farming**.

This email-based course will cover the basics of how climate change is affecting the food system, and some of the solutions that can address them.

Every week in June, you'll receive a newsletter guiding you through the analysis of the climate issues, examples of climate solutions and a curated list of related reporting. You'll also have access to a Slack discussion group with our team and fellow participants and an online discussion led by Civil Eats' Senior Staff Reporter and Contributing Editor, Lisa Held. We are offering this course at a low introductory price of \$15.

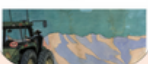


This course is for you if you want to:

- Get up to speed quickly on how climate change is affecting the food system
- Learn more about solutions to the climate crisis
- Join a community to connect and share ideas and best practices

These Stories You Need to Read

Water vs. money vs. farming
Jennifer Chalkin's 2022 investigation, "As Drought Hits Farms, Investors Lay Claim to Colorado Water" offers a deep look at an important issue: When water policy reshapes farm country.



For the past 15 years, Civil Eats has explored the intersection of food, agriculture, and climate. This course draws on our expertise to help you understand the powerful climate solutions that exist in the food system today.

Join us to get up to speed on climate solutions in food and farming for just \$15!

Goal: Raise revenue using existing content, and also use that content to reach and teach new audiences, especially young people.

What we did: Created a pop-up course that highlighted promising ways to combat food-related climate change. For \$15 (we kept the price low for this prototype), readers received a weekly newsletter for four weeks that summarized one issue tied to food and climate, with many links to relevant stories. For instance, the third newsletter, focused on “Adapting to a weird water future,” revolved around three main points: protecting farmland’s water access; capturing unpredictable rainfall; and adapting to rising seas.

Results to date: With minimal promotion, 350 people signed up for the course, and the newsroom raised \$5,280, plus another \$384 from people who also became new members after participating in the course. We also built a template for future pop-up courses.

What’s next? Another course, with some adjustments so production takes less time.

One highlight: The course attracted more than 200 people who were not already Civil Eats subscribers, members or donors, showing that we reached some of our intended audience of new readers and people who wanted to get up to speed on the subject.

One tip: Don’t despair when you’re in the messy section of the design process — it’s part of the journey. We ended up pivoting several times, and sometimes felt lost; in the end we landed on something special that looked different from what we first imagined, but fulfilled our original goal of using our rich content to reach and teach many more people.

The Dallas Morning News



Goal: Reach young, diverse creatives in Dallas-Fort Worth, an audience that hasn't been well connected to The Dallas Morning News, a major metropolitan daily news organization, and KERA, a public media organization. (The two newsrooms are partners in Arts Access, a foundation-supported initiative to cover arts, music and culture through an equity lens.)

By strengthening those new relationships, we are reporting on how to build an equitable arts funding ecosystem in the city.

What we did: Held listening sessions and prototyped a series of community engagement events to get to know the city's young, diverse audience in a non-extractive way. This led to several solutions-focused stories aimed at addressing the problem of inequity in arts funding. [Here's one example.](#)

Results to date: We have secured commitments of \$125,000 from local foundations that renewed their support for Arts Access. We also gained a \$16,000 sponsorship to cover the costs of hosting an Arts Access event.

What's next? More events, more stories and more fundraising.

One highlight: The financial support, of course, but also one of the youngest and most diverse audiences — if not the youngest and most diverse — to ever attend Dallas Morning News events.

One tip: It's all about building relationships, and nurturing strong relationships takes time. No one is going to give you money the first time you talk to them — in fact, it's good to meet with potential donors many times before asking for money, and, ideally, they bring up funding first.

The Keene Sentinel



Goal: To meet a big need for health care in our community, which is so acute that we briefly considered running a bus ourselves to make it easier for community members to access specialized services in Boston.

What we did: Worked on a comprehensive, searchable online database of local health resources and information, drawing heavily on what we learned from listening to community members about the idea. Created a pitch deck for potential sponsors. Results to date: Commitments from two donors to support the project, and strong interest in it from everyone with whom we shared the idea. The goal is \$20,000.

What's next? More pitching!

One highlight: Community listening was very successful. Almost everyone we talked with saw value in the project, and offered insights and feedback that have made it even better.

One tip: Community engagement can lead to great solutions stories, and is an essential part of a strong solutions journalism practice. The further we've gotten into this project, the more we've found solutions story ideas for our Monadnock Region Health Reporting Lab.



WSHU



Goal: Identify the best ways to promote solutions journalism to audience members, major donors and sponsors.

What we did: Tested language with three different types of contributors, and refined that language based on their reactions. Included that language in pitches, at events and as part of the station's on-air fundraising drives.

[Some examples here.](#)

Results to date: \$41,400 from a major donor, and a much stronger relationship between the organization's business and news departments. The business team now fully comprehends what solutions journalism is and how to talk about it. The news team has a better understanding of underwriting and the organization's business model.

What's next? Waiting to hear on a \$100,000 pitch we've made to Hartford HealthCare, part of which would support our solutions-focused climate and environmental coverage. Creating a new package aimed at attracting new and smaller underwriters to support our solutions work, and developing new language on solutions journalism for our next on-air fundraising drive.

One highlight: Our cross-departmental teamwork helped staff members on the business side better understand solutions journalism, and helped journalists see how they can work with the business side without compromising their independence. Development Director Laura Ballou explains how she sells solutions journalism now.

One tip: Everyone in the organization needs to contribute to the effort. If you are still selling solutions journalism internally, it's difficult to sell it externally.
