

“Journalism is a profession of care and connection”

What I came to tell you today is that I have the greatest distrust of binary narratives.

Since our deepest beliefs are always rooted in lived experiences, I can tell you why that is. The reason is, in fact, quite simple: soon after I was born, my parents split up and never got along again. Their disagreements even landed them in court twice.

When I was a young adult, I spent five years as a journalist in Russia. There, I realized that the country was summed up around the words vodka, cold and war - even before Russia invaded Ukraine. I came to the conclusion that the French media had given me one side of the story : a story based solely on facts. But this truth wasn't the whole story. We could hold on to the facts and yet tell a different, more nuanced and complex, story. A story that sounded more fair, more accurate, to the Russian people, not their political leaders. The same is true for America today.

I also quickly realized that the narrative about Russia had forced us to position ourselves as either pro- or anti-Russian— meaning : for or against Putin. This not only made me allergic to this constant pressure to choose sides, but it also helped me recognize that binary narratives applied to every single topic. I started to wonder : was polarization real for the people or completely made-up by the media ?

The world is not, and never will be, made of two opposing realities. By constantly reporting the world according to the parties involved tearing each other apart, our divisions seem definitive. Being "against the other" becomes the norm.

Last November, a study by the Reuters Institute showed that citizens see the media and journalists as dividing us more than social media. Yet, social media platforms are often singled out as the main actor in the rise of polarization.

Fortunately, there are journalists whose intent (make the world a better place) aligns with how they report on stories. This is the case of a Spanish journalist, whom I am lucky to know, Lola Garcia-Ajofrin. In September last year, a few days

after the floods in Valencia in Spain (which caused more than 200 deaths), Lola wondered what other European countries, which had faced a similar disaster, had put in place to prevent such a high loss of life. This investigation took her to Belgium, the Czech Republic, and even Austria. There, the authorities draw on the lessons from the 2002 and 2013 floods, adapting facilities and improving their public warning systems. Lola wanted to know: what could Spain learn from them ?

What can we, collectively, learn from this? In the past, Lola had already applied this framework to many other topics, in stories published by Outriders, whose founder Jakub Górnicki is here today : during the covid-19 pandemic, on just transitions, and even about the deadly human-elephant conflict going on in Sri Lanka.

I know quite a few journalists like Lola. For almost 10 years, I've been supporting them in this kind of approach, thanks to my work with the Solutions Journalism Network. Some of them are featured in this festival, like Rubryka, the very first solutions journalism focused media outlet in Ukraine.

Solutions journalism allows us to tell the "whole" story: the problems, but also the responses provided. It prevents us from opposing good news against bad news. Solutions journalism has multiple impacts: it inspires, and helps us learn lessons from past experiences. Throughout history, all over the world, humanity has organized itself to address the challenges of our times.

Solutions journalism guides us to move beyond the "for" or "against" paradigm. To engage citizens in a public debate where solutions are analyzed based on their effectiveness, rather than ideology. Readers are more engaged, and drop out less often. Solutions-oriented content, for example, clearly records more time spent on pages than other stories. Solutions journalism also plays a democratic role: it increases pressure on decision-makers by removing any excuses for inaction. If a solution works, it must be implemented.

But you might ask... If solutions journalism is so beneficial, why isn't it more widely spread?

Because despite the audience's appetite for solutions, negative information generates clickbaits: we gorge ourselves until we become sick of it. The success of divisive content is, for me, symptomatic of a society where individual emotions create financial value (it is the very principle of social media). Controversy pays off.

Yet, all recent research shows it: citizens aspire to a less conflicting, more peaceful public debate. So what is this paradox between people's aspirations, and the information they choose to consume? I've long wondered.

I see two major explanations. The first is that journalism, like many other sectors, prioritizes quantity over quality. The number of clicks, that is, the audience, allows the industry to judge whether a piece of content is "worth it." However, this industry needs to aspire to something else. It needs to consult its audience based on a new criteria: the usefulness of its content, for instance.

In the United States, a study by *More in Common* and the American Press Institute suggests that a large majority of people believe that exposing problems alongside what works to address them unites us in a common goal. This is also the conclusion, in France, of a study by the Descartes Foundation on news and climate action. Another model than the one based on quantity is therefore possible, and can even sell, since the people seem to expect it.

The second explanation came to me during the Yellow Vest movement, in France - my country. I'm not the only one who thinks the anger of the Yellow vest protestors remains misunderstood. Because what started the fire was only the visible part of the social movement. A year later, 71% of French people still thought the media weren't doing a better job at reflecting their concerns!

I wrote a book about this giant misunderstanding between the media and citizens. In it, I report the testimony of Bertrand, a 67 year old French man, whose ideas relate to the far right and who is completely disengaged from the news.

Bertrand told me : "One feels useful when they're listened to." Bertrand reminds me of some Trump voters. With Trump, they felt like they mattered to society - they could belong again. After his election in 2016, I met an American journalist

who completely changed my view of the profession : Amanda Ripley. Amanda experienced this election as a failure: hers, and the one of journalism. Because she had not listened, had not wanted to hear, the millions of Americans who voted for Trump. She, too, wondered what journalists could do differently.

The point I'm trying to make is that if you jump to solutions journalism without listening first, if you highlight initiatives that don't address people's real concerns, it doesn't heal the divide. It might even deepen it.

Italian author & holocaust survivor Primo Levi said : "The art of listening predates the art of storytelling." The crisis of journalism is, above all, a crisis of listening. In our journalism schools, we are taught to ask questions, speak in a mic, and investigate. But who teaches us how to listen? Who teaches us humility ? Who teaches us not to listen to our own inner voice, but to those we are supposed to be the voices of ? Who teaches us that our egos should not stand in the way of the stories we tell ?

I strongly believe this is where the future of our profession lies: in our ability to hear not only what is screaming, but also what is whispering. And even what is hiding in the silence.

I believe that journalism could, should, be a profession of connection, a profession of care. That's what listening does to people : it makes them feel like we actually care about them. It reduces the anger, it helps us see the connections between the different layers of society. Journalism can heal.

"Breaking news" refers to the hot news. Do you know what the synonyms of "breaking" are ? Disrupting, fracturing, shattering, fragmenting, disintegrating, destroying, splitting, reducing. Who in the world became a journalist to do just that ?

I don't know any.

"Bridging," on the other hand, means making a connection. It is urgent that we work collectively to produce *and* consume "Bridging news," which would allow us to better understand a different opinion to ours and offer a space where we belong, and eventually where we take action.

Two days ago I had the honor, together with my colleague Julia Hotz, to launch the Solutions Journalism Network's inaugural Bridging News Fellowship, here, in Bonn. Where else ? Connection and care is what this festival is all about.

This 12-month Fellowship brings to life SJN's vision for a more useful and trustworthy journalism. It will help journalists move beyond outdated assumptions about what best leads to accountability, agency, trust, connection and engagement.

As I was saying, my parents never reconciled after breaking up. Yet, when my mother realized my father was going to die, she wanted to make a step towards him. She found this postcard of Venice and sent it to him — she knew how much he had loved this city. The card doesn't say much; the tone is not even nice. But my father was very moved : he understood what the card had come to tell him. It embodied this link that, despite everything, remains.

Let's all make the effort to see what binds us all, before it is too late.