



# Scaling solutions journalism: A systematic review of audience effects, narrative mediators, and organizational constraints

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## ABSTRACT

Solutions journalism (Sojo) has been widely promoted as a response to declining trust in news and growing audience disengagement, yet empirical evidence regarding its effectiveness remains fragmented across methods, contexts, and levels of analysis. This systematic review synthesizes 41 peer-reviewed studies (2016-2025) identified through preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses 2000 (PRISMA 2020)-guided searches to determine when, how, and under what conditions Sojo produces measurable outcomes. Integrating findings across contextual environments, narrative forms, audience processes, and institutional dynamics, the review shows that Sojo consistently improves affective responses and perceived efficacy but yields uneven behavioral effects. Outcomes vary systematically depending on narrative structure, audience relevance, and organizational feasibility, while structural constraints such as resource limitations, platform logics, and newsroom norms restrict scalability. By specifying how narrative design, media context, and institutional implementation interact in shaping civic outcomes, the study advances journalism communication theory and provides evidence-based guidance for practitioners. The findings reframe Sojo not as a universal remedy for journalism's crisis but as a conditional innovation whose impact depends on identifiable mechanisms and contextual contingencies.

**Keywords:** solutions journalism, Sojo, journalism innovation, systematic review, PRISMA 2020

## INTRODUCTION

Solutions journalism (Sojo) has emerged over the past decade as both a professional innovation and a developing research domain within communication scholarship, particularly amid concerns about declining trust in news, audience disengagement, and structural transformations in the media ecosystem. Commonly defined as reporting that investigates credible responses to public problems while maintaining standards of rigor and scrutiny, Sojo has been theorized as a mechanism capable of strengthening civic efficacy, institutional trust, and public engagement (Thier & Namkoong, 2023; Zhao et al., 2022). Reflecting this promise, scholarly production has expanded rapidly across methodological traditions, including newsroom content analyses, experimental studies of message effects, and systematic syntheses of audience-oriented evidence (McIntyre & Lough, 2023; Rusch et al., 2021). Despite this empirical growth, however, the literature consistently characterizes the field as conceptually fragmented, methodologically heterogeneous, and geographically uneven, with a strong concentration of studies conducted in Western contexts (McIntyre & Lough, 2023).

A central source of this fragmentation lies in definitional instability. Scholars and practitioners employ partially overlapping labels—such as constructive journalism and positive journalism—without standardized criteria, varying in their emphasis on evidentiary rigor, emotional tone, and normative orientation. These divergences shape sampling frames, operationalizations, and outcome measures, thereby limiting comparability and constraining cumulative theory building. The literature further reveals persistent disagreement over whether SoJo should be conceptualized primarily as a normative reform initiative or as an empirically testable communication intervention, generating distinct theoretical expectations and evaluative frameworks. Inconsistent construct boundaries—particularly regarding what constitutes a “solution”, how rigor is operationalized, and which levels of analysis are most relevant—have therefore been identified as obstacles to replication and synthesis across studies (Thier & Namkoong, 2023; McIntyre & Lough, 2023).

Empirical findings mirror this conceptual instability. Experimental studies frequently report increases in positive affect, hope, or perceived efficacy following exposure to solutions-oriented stories (Maduneme & Cohen, 2024; Troy, 2025), yet evidence regarding downstream cognitive, behavioral, or policy outcomes remains inconsistent. Some studies detect no significant increases in action intentions or policy support despite emotional shifts, and cross-national experiments document opposing trust effects depending on context, indicating the presence of unmeasured moderators. Existing syntheses similarly conclude that real-world behavioral impacts are uneven. These patterns suggest that although SoJo reliably influences short-term psychological responses, the mechanisms linking exposure to durable civic outcomes remain insufficiently specified (Thier & Namkoong, 2023).

Methodological diversity further complicates interpretation. Laboratory and online experiments tend to detect short-term effects, whereas qualitative and field-based research highlight organizational constraints, workflow pressures, and implementation challenges not captured in controlled designs. Differences in analytic strategies, measurement choices, and sampling approaches can substantially affect effect estimates, a pattern consistent with meta-research showing that analytic decisions shape conclusions about communication effects (Anker et al., 2010; Rains et al., 2018). Structural blind spots compound these limitations: evidence remains concentrated in a limited number of regions, longitudinal studies are scarce, and platform-specific analyses are underrepresented. Even when positive audience responses are observed, institutional factors such as editorial workflows, revenue models, and platform incentives may constrain implementation and scalability (Jackson et al., 2025; Nelson & Dahmen, 2023).

Taken together, these characteristics indicate that SoJo research has reached a stage typical of emerging scholarly domains in which empirical accumulation outpaces theoretical consolidation. In such contexts, systematic reviews play a field-advancing role by clarifying constructs, integrating fragmented findings, modeling heterogeneity, and specifying boundary conditions that narrative syntheses cannot establish (Banas & Rains, 2010; Rains et al., 2018; Van Krieken & Sanders, 2021). Crucially, heterogeneity should be treated not as an obstacle but as the central analytic object, since systematic synthesis allows researchers to determine whether variation reflects contextual differences or methodological artifacts (Anker et al., 2010; Rains et al., 2018). Evidence from other emergent domains further demonstrates that synthesis remains productive even without full conceptual consensus when sufficient empirical studies exist for structured comparison (Van Krieken & Sanders, 2021).

Critically, however, existing syntheses leave a specific and consequential gap unaddressed. McIntyre and Lough’s (2023) systematic review synthesized audience-effects evidence but did not integrate organizational or contextual implementation factors. Rusch et al. (2021) addressed newsroom perspectives without examining audience-level psychological mechanisms. Thier and Namkoong (2023) theorized mechanisms of SoJo effects without a systematic cross-study comparison of moderating conditions across contexts. No prior review has simultaneously integrated narrative design, audience processes, contextual variation, and institutional constraints within a single explanatory framework. This fragmentation has concrete consequences: persistent contradictions remain unresolved in the literature—such as why SoJo reliably improves affect but yields inconsistent behavioral effects, and why cross-national trust effects diverge—precisely because no synthesis has modeled the moderating and mediating conditions jointly. The practical implications are equally significant: without an integrated framework, journalists, newsroom managers, and journalism educators cannot derive actionable evidence-based guidance about when to invest in solutions

reporting, for what audiences, in what narrative forms, and under what organizational conditions. The present review addresses this gap directly.

The stakes of such clarification extend beyond theoretical refinement. In the context of declining trust and structural transformation in journalism, SoJo has been advanced as a practice capable of strengthening journalism's public-service role. Yet meta-analytic research across communication indicates that media effects are typically modest and context-dependent (Rains et al., 2018). Establishing when, how, and under what conditions SoJo produces its claimed benefits is therefore essential for both scholarly understanding and professional decision-making, particularly when solutions-oriented reporting may be perceived as promotional and risk undermining credibility (Jackson et al., 2025; Nelson & Dahmen, 2023). In this sense, the present review contributes to journalism communication theory by specifying how narrative design, media context, and organizational implementation interact in the production of civic outcomes.

In particular, this review pursues three substantive objectives. The first objective is to analyze how SoJo is implemented, adapted, and functionally interpreted across different geopolitical and cultural contexts, with particular attention to variations between Western democracies and Global South or post-colonial settings when empirical evidence allows (SO1). This objective is addressed through the following research question:

**RQ1.** How do the implementation, adaptation, and functions attributed to SoJo vary between Western democracies and the Global South?

The second objective is to examine how SoJo affects audience responses—including emotional, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes—and to assess the narrative, audience-level, and contextual factors that moderate or mediate these effects, as well as the genres, narrative formulas, and engagement devices through which such effects are shaped (SO2). This integrated objective is addressed through the following research question:

**RQ2.** How does SoJo influence emotional, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes, and what narrative structures, engagement devices, audience, or contextual factors shape the magnitude, direction, and mediation of these effects?

Finally, the review examines the structural, organizational, and cultural barriers that limit the institutionalization and scalability of SoJo within newsrooms (SO3). This objective is addressed through the final research question:

**RQ3.** What structural, organizational, and cultural barriers limit the institutionalization and scalability of SoJo in newsrooms?

This study advances journalism and communication scholarship by offering the first systematic synthesis that integrates contextual, narrative, psychological, and institutional dimensions of SoJo within a single explanatory framework. Rather than treating these domains separately—as prior studies have typically done—this review identifies the mechanisms, moderators, and boundary conditions that jointly determine when, how, and under what circumstances SoJo produces civic outcomes. In doing so, it moves the literature beyond descriptive mapping toward theory-building.

More specifically, the integrative framework developed in the Discussion resolves three recurrent contradictions that prior reviews documented but could not explain. First, it accounts for the gap between SoJo's robust emotional effects and its weak behavioral outcomes—a pattern that prior studies treated as unexplained residual variance—by demonstrating that narrative form functions as a necessary enabling condition: without coherent narrative structure, even accurate solution information fails to activate the psychological pathways linking exposure to behavior. Second, the framework explains divergent trust and efficacy effects across national and political contexts by identifying media-system characteristics and audience predispositions as higher-order moderators that single-context studies could neither detect nor account for. Third, it resolves the apparent paradox of positive audience effects coexisting with fragile institutional adoption by positioning organizational feasibility—rather than journalistic awareness or motivation—as the binding constraint on whether SoJo effects can accumulate socially over time. These resolutions distinguish the present synthesis from prior integrative work and constitute its specific theoretical advance beyond descriptive mapping.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

A systematic review provides a transparent and reproducible procedure for synthesizing scientific evidence on a clearly defined research question, reducing bias and ensuring traceability across the review process (Gough et al., 2012; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). Given the methodological and conceptual heterogeneity of the SoJo literature, this approach is particularly suited to identifying patterns, gaps, and boundary conditions across studies.

To ensure methodological rigor and transparency of the process, this review follows the guidelines set out in the preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses 2000 (PRISMA 2020) statement (Page et al., 2021), which is recognized as one of the international standards for preparing and presenting systematic reviews. PRISMA 2020 provides a clear structure for documenting each stage of the process and is particularly useful in social science and communication contexts, where methodological designs can be diverse.

### Literature Search Strategy

To identify the studies included in this systematic review, comprehensive bibliographic searches were conducted on the Web of Science core collection and Scopus databases. The search strategy was designed to retrieve empirical and theoretical works explicitly focused on SoJo. In Web of Science, the search term “solutions journalism” was applied to the Topic field, which includes title, abstract, author keywords, and Keywords Plus. In Scopus, the same term was searched within the article title, abstract, and keywords fields. The search was restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles published in English between 2010 and 2025. No additional subject-area filters were applied at this stage in order to maximize sensitivity. Although related labels such as constructive journalism and positive journalism appear in the literature, the search was intentionally restricted to “solutions journalism” for two reasons. First, this term identifies the most operationally specific and institutionally grounded variant of the broader family, defined by the solutions journalism network’s criteria of evidentiary rigor, critical scrutiny of responses, and an explicit problem-solution structure. Second, including broader or partially overlapping terms would have introduced conceptually heterogeneous studies addressing distinct phenomena, thereby undermining construct validity and the internal coherence of the synthesis. This restriction constitutes a deliberate scope decision rather than an oversight, and its implications for coverage are acknowledged as a limitation. The initial search yielded 87 records in Web of Science and 72 records in Scopus prior to deduplication and screening. Although the search window extended back to 2010, no eligible studies were identified prior to 2016, which therefore marks the de facto starting point of the corpus.

### Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

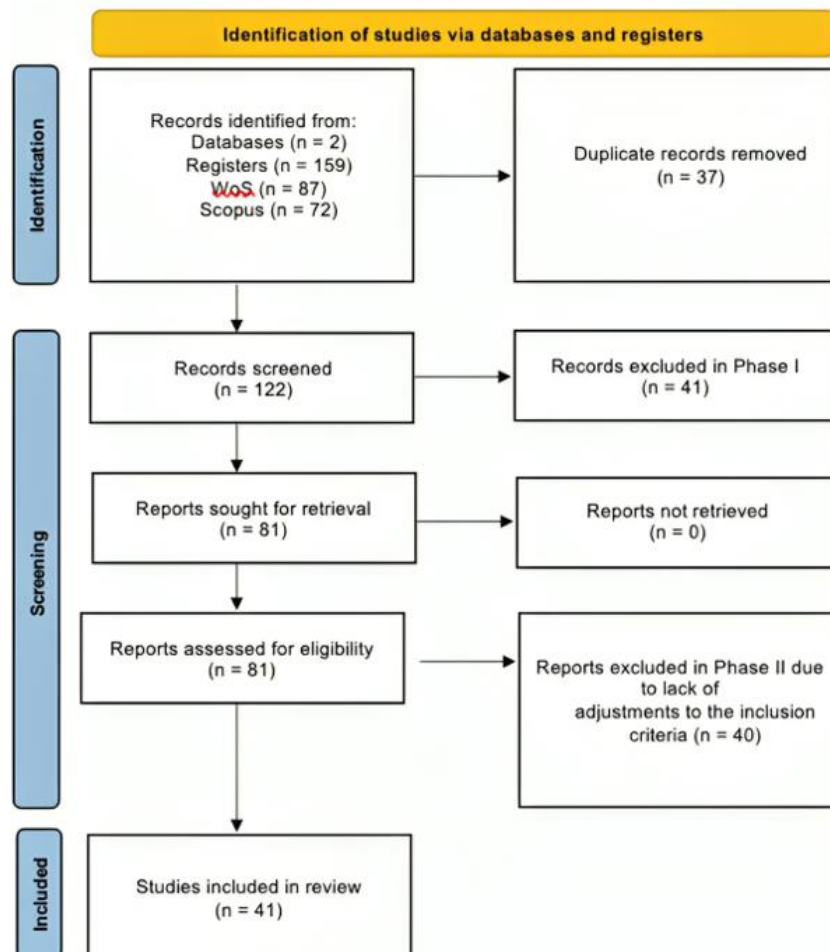
In a second step, inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined following the PICOS model (Moher et al., 2009) in order to ensure the thematic relevance, methodological coherence, and empirical relevance of the selected studies. As can be seen in [Table 1](#), the review included theoretical or empirical studies focused on SoJo, published between 2010 and 2025 in English, in journals indexed in WoS or Scopus. Papers without a clear methodological basis, without explicit reference to the approach, or focused on other models of responsible journalism were excluded. As this was a descriptive and interpretative review, no comparative criteria were applied.

### Selection of Studies

Study selection followed a two-stage screening process supported by Rayyan, a validated systematic review platform that enables transparent, blinded screening and systematic conflict resolution (Ouzzani et al., 2016). After duplicate removal ( $n = 37$ ), 122 records were screened at title and abstract level (phase I), leading to the exclusion of 41 studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria. Full-text screening (phase II) of the remaining 81 articles resulted in the exclusion of 40 additional studies due to insufficient thematic relevance. The final corpus comprised 41 empirical studies, detailed in [Appendix A](#). The complete screening and study selection process is presented in [Figure 1](#).

**Table 1.** PICOS model: Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Component	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
P (population/ phenomenon of interest)	Studies addressing SoJo in the field of journalism, not only theoretically, but also empirically, and critically.	Studies focusing on other types of socially responsible journalism (e.g., constructive journalism, peace journalism) without direct reference to SoJo.
I (exposure/ phenomenon of study)	Studies on the implementation, evaluation or impact of SoJo in the media. Also included are studies exploring its ability to reduce news fatigue and build trust in the media.	Contributions that address innovation in journalism in general without focusing on SoJo specifically, or that do not address its implementation dynamics and audience impact.
C (comparison)	Not applicable for this descriptive and interpretative systematic review.	-
O (expected results)	Contributions to identify (a) definitions and approaches to SoJo, (b) emotional and psychological impacts on audiences, (c) challenges and barriers in its implementation, and (d) good practices and strategies for its sustainability in the media.	Studies that do not present substantive evidence on SoJo, anecdotal articles, unsubstantiated reflections, or opinionated texts without a clear methodological basis.
S (study design)	Original, peer-reviewed articles published between 2010 and 2025 in academic journals indexed in Web of Science or Scopus, with empirical evidence or rigorous conceptual development, in English.	Review articles, preprints, bachelor's, master's, or doctoral theses, technical reports, books, book chapters, or papers published outside the study period, in non-selected language, or outside the indicated databases.



**Figure 1.** PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (Source: Page et al., 2021)

**Data Extraction**

From each of the 41 articles, a structured template was used to extract a total of 19 variables organized into five blocks. The first block comprised seven descriptive variables (article title, authors, year of publication,

journal, country or region of focus, DOI, and a summary of the main findings). The second block included three methodological variables (type of methodology, data collection technique, and sample characteristics). The remaining three blocks were aligned with the study's three specific objectives. The third block (SO1) addressed contextual implementation, with three variables capturing the geopolitical and cultural setting of the studied case, the professional functions attributed to Sojo in that context, and the local adaptations of the practice. The fourth block (SO2) addressed audience-level outcomes and their conditioning factors, with four variables coding emotional, cognitive, and behavioral effects; narrative structures and engagement devices; audience-level moderators; and contextual moderators. The fifth block (SO3) addressed barriers to institutionalization and scalability, with two variables coding structural and economic constraints, and organizational and cultural-professional constraints.

Data extraction was conducted using a structured two-stage process combining AI-assisted systematization and human validation. In the first stage, NotebookLM was used as an extraction support tool, processing each of the 41 full-text articles through a standardized prompt sequence aligned with the 19-variable template. Prompts were formulated as direct questions corresponding to each variable block—for example: "What research methodology and data collection technique does this study use?"; "What are the main findings regarding audience emotional, cognitive, or behavioral responses to Sojo?"; "What barriers to implementation or scalability are identified?"; and "Which narrative structures, engagement devices, and audience- or context-level moderators are reported as shaping the effects of Sojo?"—and were applied consistently across all studies. In the second stage, all AI-generated responses underwent systematic human verification. Descriptive and structural variables (author names, publication year, journal, country, DOI, methodology type, sample characteristics) were verified against the original source texts and corrected where discrepancies were detected. Interpretive variables—including ethical and technical challenges, and practice recommendations—were treated more stringently: each AI response was independently re-read and coded by a human researcher against the full text, with AI outputs accepted only when the human coder confirmed their accuracy, completeness, and contextual fidelity. In all cases of discrepancy, the human coder's judgment prevailed. This two-stage process was applied to 100% of the extracted variables across all 41 studies. The complete prompt template and extraction protocol are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

### Assessment of the Methodological Quality of the Analyzed Studies

Methodological quality was assessed using the mixed methods appraisal tool 2018 (MMAT 2018) (Hong et al., 2018), which provides a common framework for appraising qualitative, quantitative (randomized, non-randomized, and descriptive), and mixed-methods studies. The instrument applies seven criteria—two general and five specific to each design—to identify methodological strengths and limitations and to reduce the risk of bias in evidence synthesis.

Across the four methodological categories, the MMAT 2018 appraisal indicates a generally high level of methodological quality, albeit with some differentiated patterns across designs. All 16 qualitative studies fully meet the seven criteria, evidencing clear research questions, appropriate methodological alignment, robust analytic procedures, and strong coherence between data, interpretation, and conclusions. The 11 randomized quantitative studies also meet all appraisal standards, suggesting adequate randomization, baseline comparability, completeness of outcome data, and appropriate analytical techniques. In contrast, the 8 descriptive quantitative studies, while consistently meeting most criteria, display several instances of partial compliance—particularly regarding sample representativeness—indicating limitations in generalizability despite otherwise sound design and measurement procedures. A similar nuance appears among the 6 mixed-methods studies: although they meet most quality benchmarks, several only partially satisfy the criterion concerning adherence of each methodological component to its respective quality standards, pointing to integration asymmetries rather than fundamental design flaws. Overall, the pattern reveals a robust and reliable evidence base with limited methodological bias, while also highlighting specific areas—chiefly representativeness and mixed-method integration—where future research could strengthen methodological rigor. Details of the bias analysis for the set of studies comprising this systematic review can be found in [Appendix A](#).

These findings should be interpreted in light of a methodological clarification. The corpus consists entirely of peer-reviewed articles indexed in Web of Science or Scopus, a sampling criterion that introduces pre-publication quality filtering: studies with fundamental design flaws are less likely to have successfully completed peer review in high-ranking journals. Aggregate scores above the threshold are therefore consistent with the nature of the sampling frame rather than indicative of an uncritical appraisal.

## Data Analysis

A systematic inductive-deductive thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke (2006) and Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006). Open coding generated preliminary categories, which were refined through axial and selective coding into coherent thematic structures (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Coding decisions were cross-checked, thematic saturation confirmed, and higher-order themes developed, integrating conceptual, methodological, and contextual insights (Nowell et al., 2017).

## RESULTS

### Characteristics of the Included Studies

The final corpus comprises 41 peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2016 and 2025 across a diverse yet thematically coherent range of communication and journalism journals. Although firmly anchored within core outlets of journalism studies—most notably Journalism Practice and Journalism Studies, which concentrate the highest volume of publications—the literature also extends into interdisciplinary venues such as Environmental Communication and Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly. This distribution reflects not only the consolidation of the debate within journalism scholarship, but also its intersections with climate communication, media psychology, and political communication.

Geographically, the field remains predominantly USA-centric (e.g., McIntyre et al., 2018b). Nevertheless, recent years reveal a gradual diversification of empirical settings, including studies conducted in France (Amiel & Powers, 2019), Germany (Mai & von Sikorski, 2025), and comparative analyses spanning Africa, Europe, and the USA (Li, 2023; Miller et al., 2025). This expansion suggests an emerging, though still uneven, internationalization of the research agenda.

Methodologically, the corpus displays notable heterogeneity, comprising 16 qualitative, 11 experimental, 8 quantitative descriptive, and 6 mixed-methods studies. Data collection strategies vary systematically by design. Qualitative research relies predominantly on semi-structured, in-depth interviews to examine journalists' role conceptions and production routines (Lough & McIntyre, 2021; Usery, 2024). By contrast, experimental studies frequently employ online panels (e.g., MTurk, Qualtrics, and Bilendi) to expose participants to manipulated news stimuli—typically contrasting “problem-oriented” and “solution-oriented” frames—while measuring discrete emotional responses (e.g., hope and anxiety), as well as self-efficacy and collective efficacy, through validated psychological instruments (Maduneme & Cohen, 2024; Thier & Lin, 2022). Quantitative descriptive research often draws on the solutions journalism network's story tracker database as a sampling frame for systematic content analysis (McIntyre & Lough, 2021). Ethnographic newsroom immersion, however, remains exceptional (Jackson et al., 2025).

Sample characteristics mirror these methodological divides. Experimental studies typically recruit between 200 and 800 participants (e.g., Mai & von Sikorski, 2025), whereas journalist surveys can exceed 1,300 respondents (McIntyre et al., 2018b). Qualitative samples are purposive and smaller, generally ranging from 10 to 30 interviews. Analytically, quantitative research increasingly employs advanced modelling techniques—including mediation analysis and structural equation modelling—to test theoretical mechanisms (Maduneme & Cohen, 2024), while descriptive studies systematically report intercoder reliability indices such as Krippendorff's alpha. Qualitative investigations primarily rely on inductive thematic analysis or grounded theory approaches (Wenzel et al., 2018), enabling fine-grained interpretation of how SoJo is conceptualized and enacted in practice. Details of the methodological approach of the studies examined can be found in [Appendix A](#).

## Contextual Variations in the Implementation and Functions of Sojo

Evidence from the 41 studies indicates that Sojo's implementation, adaptation, and attributed functions vary systematically across geopolitical contexts, largely reflecting differences in media systems, professional ideologies, and political environments. In Western democracies—especially the USA and the UK—Sojo is frequently institutionalized as a strategic response to declining audience trust and economic instability. Nelson and Dahmen (2025) show that USA newsrooms often adopt Sojo to attract funders and stabilize revenue streams, while Amiel and Powers (2019) characterize its uptake in France as a “trojan horse” for marketing-driven circulation strategies. Yet implementation in these settings is constrained by newsroom routines: Jackson et al. (2025) report that time-pressured local journalists in the UK frequently produce “Sojo lite”, a diluted form lacking methodological rigor because it must conform to incompatible production workflows.

In contrast, in Global South and post-colonial contexts Sojo is more commonly embedded in broader social or political projects, particularly peacebuilding, development, and crisis recovery. Ciftci (2019) documents how UN-supported communication initiatives in Somalia applied Sojo principles to facilitate electoral participation, effectively blending journalistic practice with conflict-resolution objectives. Likewise, Poets et al. (2023) describe a participatory, care-oriented variant in Brazilian favelas, where Sojo functions less as a commercial product than as a communicative survival strategy for marginalized communities.

These contextual divergences extend to the functions attributed to Sojo. In Western settings, its role is typically framed as corrective or therapeutic. Zhao et al. (2022) find that UK audiences perceive it as psychologically empowering during crisis-fatigue periods such as COVID-19, while McIntyre et al. (2018a) argue that it can re-engage cynical publics by fostering a “healthier public climate”. In Global South contexts, by contrast, Sojo often assumes interventionist or facilitative roles. Li (2023) shows that in East Asia it functioned as a “loyal facilitator” supporting government health strategies, whereas in the USA it operated more as a civic-oriented mechanism addressing grassroots gaps. McIntyre and Sobel (2017) similarly illustrate its explicitly reconciliatory function in Rwanda, a mandate far more interventionist than the Western watchdog ideal.

Such variation reflects differing professional norms and political constraints. Western journalists frequently engage in boundary work to distinguish Sojo from advocacy and preserve objectivity (Aitamurto & Varma, 2018; Powers & Curry, 2019). Nevertheless, Miller et al. (2025) detect no regional differences in adherence to solutions journalism network rigor criteria, suggesting that globally standardized training has homogenized technical practice even as contextual roles diverge (Li, 2023). Overall, there is moderate consensus that Sojo acts as a universal counterweight to negativity bias, yet its structural purpose shifts from market-survival logic in Western media systems to development-oriented communication in the Global South (Amiel & Powers, 2019; Ciftci, 2019). A key unresolved tension concerns the compatibility between Western norms of detachment and the explicitly care-based approaches often required in marginalized or post-conflict settings (Poets et al., 2023; Wenzel et al., 2018). A major research gap remains the scarcity of comparative designs examining how exported Western Sojo standards interact with local journalistic cultures, as existing cross-regional evidence is still limited (Miller et al., 2025).

## Differential Emotional, Cognitive, and Behavioral Effects of Sojo

Evidence from eleven experimental studies and multiple mixed-method and qualitative investigations indicates that the effects of Sojo vary systematically across emotional, cognitive, and behavioral domains, forming a sequential rather than independent impact structure. Overall, the strongest and most consistent effects occur at the emotional level, followed by cognitive outcomes, while behavioral effects remain comparatively weaker and less stable.

At the emotional level, the most robust finding is Sojo's capacity to regulate negative affect. Experimental evidence demonstrates a reliable “buffering effect”, whereby exposure to solutions-oriented narratives significantly reduces negative emotional states compared with problem-focused news (McIntyre, 2019; McIntyre et al., 2018b). This pattern is replicated across topics, including sustainability coverage, where solutions framing decreases nervousness and irritation (Schäfer et al., 2025). However, the production of positive emotions is more contingent. Although Sojo can directly increase positive affect (Maduneme & Cohen,

2024), hope does not emerge automatically; rather, it depends on specific narrative conditions (Thier & Lin, 2022). Visual framing further complicates this domain: Midberry et al. (2024) show that, counterintuitively, images depicting only social problems elicit the lowest levels of compassion, suggesting that combination frames (problem + solution) are more effective for emotional engagement.

Cognitive effects center primarily on efficacy beliefs and narrative engagement. Across studies, SoJo consistently enhances self-efficacy—the perception that one can take meaningful action (Dahmen et al., 2021; Thier & Lin, 2022)—and can also strengthen collective efficacy, or confidence in society's capacity to address problems (Maduneme & Cohen, 2024). Yet cognitive outcomes depend heavily on storytelling form. Solutions framing alone does not increase trust; instead, narrative transportation functions as the operative mechanism driving trust and engagement (Thier et al., 2021). Similarly, Mai and von Sikorski (2025) demonstrate that fact-based solutions lacking narrative structure fail to generate transportation or efficacy effects, indicating that “solution presence” without narrative form is cognitively inert.

Behavioral outcomes reveal the greatest inconsistency. While SoJo reliably increases behavioral intentions—such as willingness to share, seek information, or engage further (McIntyre & Sobel, 2017; Li, 2021)—these intentions rarely translate into observable actions. Experimental findings show no significant differences in actual donations between problem and solution conditions (McIntyre, 2019), and audience skepticism toward solutions stories can dampen engagement when they are perceived as overly positive framing (Mellor & Nguyen, 2023). Visual presentation also plays a complex role: McIntyre et al. (2018b) found that pairing a solutions story with a conflict-oriented photo increases negative affect, mitigating the positive emotional benefits of the solutions narrative.

Across domains, evidence supports a serial mediation model in which SoJo first alters emotional states, then strengthens cognitive efficacy, and only subsequently influences behavioral intentions (Maduneme & Cohen, 2024). Direct exposure effects on behavior are often non-significant unless mediated by narrative transportation and efficacy beliefs (Mai & von Sikorski, 2025). This pattern aligns with broaden-and-build theory, indicating that SoJo operates by expanding psychological resources rather than triggering behavior directly (Thier & Lin, 2022). When visual packaging appears overly congruent or positive—such as pairing solution text with solution photos rather than neutral ones—behavioral motivation can decline (McIntyre et al., 2018b).

In sum, there is strong consensus that SoJo reliably reduces negative affect and enhances efficacy perceptions, but its capacity to generate sustained civic behavior remains weak and inconsistent (McIntyre, 2019; Mellor & Nguyen, 2023). The most firmly established effect is emotional regulation, whereas the most significant unresolved gap concerns whether repeated exposure produces lasting behavioral or attitudinal change, as longitudinal evidence is largely absent (Jackson et al., 2025; Lough & McIntyre, 2021).

### **Multilevel Moderators Shaping the Magnitude and Direction of SoJo Effects**

Synthesis of the 41-study corpus indicates that the magnitude and direction of SoJo effects are shaped by a multilayered set of moderators operating at audience, message, and contextual levels, with narrative structure emerging as the most consistently influential determinant. Across studies, these moderators do not merely amplify or dampen outcomes; rather, they condition whether emotional, cognitive, and behavioral effects emerge at all.

At the audience level, personal relevance is a robust moderator. Empirical evidence shows that highly relevant stories generate stronger positive affect and behavioral intentions than less relevant ones (McIntyre, 2019). Political ideology also systematically shapes outcomes: liberals report higher collective efficacy and pro-environmental intentions than conservatives following exposure (Maduneme & Cohen, 2024), indicating that prior worldview constrains interpretive uptake. Demographic composition likewise matters, as older or more diverse samples exhibit different direct effects compared to student samples (Maduneme & Cohen, 2024). Notably, prior skepticism does not eliminate impact when narrative transportation is achieved, because immersion predicts trust regardless of initial attitudes (Thier et al., 2021).

Message-level moderators exert the strongest and most consistent influence. Narrative structure is the dominant factor: Mai and von Sikorski (2025) demonstrate that solutions information alone fails to generate hope or efficacy unless embedded in a narrative format. This indicates that storytelling functions as a

necessary enabling condition rather than a stylistic embellishment. Visual framing introduces complex and sometimes counterintuitive moderation patterns. In conflict-oriented stories, neutral photographs paired with solutions text can increase behavioral intentions more than congruent solution imagery, possibly because overly positive packaging signals public relations rather than journalism (McIntyre et al., 2018b). Solution effectiveness also matters: effective solutions reduce negative affect more strongly than ineffective ones (McIntyre, 2019). In contrast, responsibility framing appears comparatively weak, as attributing solutions to individuals versus institutions produces negligible differences in efficacy outcomes (Schäfer et al., 2025).

Contextual moderators further condition impact. Topic choice independently shapes emotional responses (Midberry et al., 2024; Schäfer et al., 2025), while platform affordances constrain depth: algorithm-driven social media formats often compress SoJo into simplified “SoJo lite” forms that limit rigor (Jackson et al., 2025; Kovačević, 2023).

Mechanistically, these moderations are explained by narrative transportation theory, which posits that immersion reduces counter-arguing and enables belief change (Thier et al., 2021; Mai & von Sikorski, 2025), and by the extended parallel process model, which predicts that audiences must perceive both threat and efficacy for persuasive engagement (Maduneme & Cohen, 2024). Priming processes further account for cross-domain spillovers such as advertising synergy (Li, 2021).

Overall, there is strong agreement that narrative structure and personal relevance are positive moderators, whereas visual factors operate in nonlinear ways depending on outcome type. The most consequential moderator is narrative form itself, as solutions reporting without storytelling consistently fails to produce meaningful cognitive or behavioral effects (Mai & von Sikorski, 2025). A key unresolved gap is the absence of longitudinal research testing whether repeated exposure strengthens or attenuates these moderated effects over time (Lough & McIntyre, 2021; Schäfer et al., 2025).

### Genres, Narrative Logics, and Engagement Devices as Mediators of SoJo Impact

Across the 41-study corpus, SoJo emerges as a distinctive journalistic genre defined not only by thematic focus but by formal conventions that shape its audience effects. Structurally, SoJo is frequently differentiated from traditional accountability reporting. Content analyses indicate limited overlap between investigative journalism and SoJo: although both identify social problems, SoJo typically omits classic watchdog elements such as exposing wrongdoing or naming responsible actors, instead operating as a forward-oriented genre emphasizing responses and pathways to improvement (Walth et al., 2019). Within mainstream media practice, three dominant storytelling formulas recur: the positive case model (spotlighting successful initiatives), the Advisory Journalism model (offering actionable guidance), and the positive societal development model (highlighting statistical progress) (Djerf-Pierre & Ekström, 2025).

Narratively, the prevailing structural logic is a “problem-solution-insight” sequence, though adherence varies across formats and platforms. Experimental evidence demonstrates that narrative form is not ornamental but constitutive: solutions information presented without narrative elements fails to generate hope or efficacy effects (Mai & von Sikorski, 2025). This aligns with findings that narrative transportation—audience immersion in a story—functions as the primary mechanism through which SoJo builds trust and engagement (Thier et al., 2021). In practice, however, the ideal narrative structure is often simplified into what has been described as a “bridge-to-hope” format: a brief problem statement followed immediately by a positive resolution, frequently minimizing critical scrutiny to sustain an uplifting arc (Djerf-Pierre & Ekström, 2025). Platform constraints intensify this simplification. Analyses of social-media video production show that algorithmic and format pressures favor short, emotionally accessible content, leading to diluted “SoJo lite” versions that omit complexity, evidence, or limitations (Kovačević, 2023).

Engagement devices further mediate SoJo’s effects, especially visual framing and mobilizing information. Theoretically, effective visual SoJo should be comprehensive—depicting both problem and response (Midberry & Dahmen, 2020)—yet empirical analysis shows that most published images depict only solutions (Lough & McIntyre, 2021). Experimental findings indicate that visual framing does not significantly alter empathy, though counterintuitively, problem-only imagery elicits the lowest levels of compassion, while solution-only or text-only formats perform best (Midberry et al., 2024), while paradoxically, neutral images paired with solutions text can increase audience interest in the story more than congruent positive imagery,

possibly because overly harmonious packaging resembles promotional communication rather than journalism (McIntyre et al., 2018b). Similarly, although mobilizing information is theoretically central to Sojo's civic orientation, it is often absent in practice; for example, only 5.1% of COVID-related stories included actionable audience guidance (Li, 2023).

Taken together, formal characteristics operate as conditional enablers of impact. Narrative structure functions as a prerequisite for cognitive and behavioral effects, visual composition moderates emotional and motivational responses, and the inclusion of limitations enhances credibility by preserving epistemic rigor (Walth et al., 2019). Consequently, the decisive mediator is not the presence of solutions per se but the form through which they are communicated. A key unresolved gap concerns the longitudinal influence of visual sequencing and multimodal storytelling, as existing research relies largely on single exposures or static stimuli (Kovačević, 2023; Midberry et al., 2024).

### **Structural, Organizational, and Cultural Barriers to the Institutionalization of Sojo**

Across the corpus of 41 studies, barriers to the institutionalization and scalability of Sojo emerge as multidimensional, operating at structural, organizational, and cultural levels. Evidence consistently indicates that these constraints are not intrinsic to the Sojo model itself but rather reflect broader systemic conditions shaping contemporary journalism.

At the structural level, the most pervasive obstacle is resource scarcity linked to the erosion of traditional media business models. Local newsrooms, for instance, are described as production systems optimized for speed and volume, conditions under which labor-intensive solutions reporting appears incompatible with daily output demands (Jackson et al., 2025). Empirical case evidence shows that attempts to institutionalize Sojo can falter when staff turnover and routine production pressures undermine sustained implementation (Lough & McIntyre, 2021). Economic uncertainty further constrains adoption: editors frequently cannot demonstrate that Sojo generates revenue, leading to dependence on philanthropic funding and rendering initiatives vulnerable to donor priorities (Nelson & Dahmen, 2025). Technological infrastructures reinforce these limitations. Platform algorithms—particularly in social media environments—favor brevity and emotional immediacy, forcing Sojo into simplified formats that omit evidence, nuance, or methodological rigor (Kovačević, 2023)—a phenomenon Jackson et al. (2025) explicitly term “Sojo lite”.

Organizational barriers primarily concern newsroom routines, incentives, and managerial integration. Studies show that journalists are willing to produce solutions reporting encounter rigid legacy workflows, tight deadlines, and insufficient editorial support, particularly in environments oriented toward breaking news (Lough et al., 2024). Adoption also depends heavily on institutional intentionality: without explicit managerial prioritization, Sojo tends to occur sporadically or through individual initiative rather than as a stable editorial practice (Beck & Daoust-Boisvert, 2025). Metric-driven performance systems further distort incentives, encouraging click-oriented output instead of resource-intensive reporting (Jackson et al., 2025). Even when training is provided, inconsistent internal definitions of what counts as a “solution” can generate confusion and reduce production continuity (Lough & McIntyre, 2021).

Cultural and epistemic resistance constitutes a third major constraint. Professional norms of objectivity and skepticism toward advocacy often position Sojo as epistemologically suspect. Investigative journalists, for example, may perceive it as lacking the watchdog function necessary for accountability (Walth et al., 2019). Comparative evidence suggests that during crisis contexts such as the COVID-crisis, Sojo sometimes operates as a “loyal facilitator” of official narratives rather than a critical monitor (Li, 2023). In some national contexts, journalists explicitly reject Sojo as a perceived vehicle for marketing agendas, thereby defending professional autonomy (Amiel & Powers, 2019). Additional barriers arise from implicit bias within editorial cultures, where solutions stories involving marginalized communities may be dismissed as soft or insufficiently objective (Lough et al., 2024).

Overall, there is strong agreement that time pressure and resource scarcity constitute the primary structural impediments, while cultural concerns about advocacy represent a persistent secondary tension (Jackson et al., 2025; Walth et al., 2019). The most consequential limitation is the incompatibility between Sojo's high-labor rigor and the speed-driven digital news economy (Kovačević, 2023; Nelson & Dahmen, 2025). A key enabling condition identified in the literature is the development of alternative metrics privileging trust

and engagement over raw reach, which could incentivize sustained editorial investment in solutions reporting (Lough & McIntyre, 2021).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

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The evidence synthesized in this review supports what we term the sequential conditional effects model of Sojo, a multilevel explanatory framework in which Sojo operates through sequential and interacting layers of influence. At the production level, narrative design features shape message structure and informational cues. At the reception level, these features influence psychological processes such as transportation, efficacy perception, and emotional regulation. At the contextual level, audience characteristics and media-system conditions moderate these processes. Finally, at the structural level, organizational and economic constraints determine whether Sojo can be implemented consistently and on scale. Civic outcomes therefore, emerge not from exposure alone but from the interaction of narrative form, contextual moderators, and institutional feasibility conditions.

Considered as a whole, the findings across the three analytical objectives clarify how these layers interact and directly address the conceptual fragmentation identified in the introduction. First, with regard to contextual variability, the evidence demonstrates that Sojo does not operate as a uniform professional model across media systems but instead assumes distinct institutional functions depending on geopolitical and professional environments. In Western contexts, it frequently functions as a strategy to rebuild trust and audience relevance, whereas in Global South settings, it often operates as a facilitative or developmental reporting approach. Such variation confirms that contextual conditions are not peripheral but constitutive, indicating that Sojo cannot be theorized independently of structural media environments. Effects are therefore conditional rather than universal, emerging from the interaction between narrative form, audience predispositions, and contextual factors.

Second, concerning audience responses and the narrative mechanisms that shape them, the results reveal a sequential pattern consistent with established communication-effects theory. Emotional regulation and reductions in negative affect appear as the most robust and replicable outcomes, followed by increases in perceived efficacy and cognitive engagement, whereas behavioral effects remain comparatively inconsistent. This pattern suggests that Sojo operates primarily through mediated pathways: narrative features influence civic outcomes indirectly by activating psychological mechanisms such as efficacy beliefs and emotional involvement. Importantly, the evidence also indicates that positive affective responses alone do not reliably translate into behavioral change, implying that downstream outcomes depend on additional enabling conditions beyond emotional engagement. This finding refines optimistic assumptions frequently associated with the practice by showing that its influence is structured rather than automatic.

Within this same dimension, analysis of communicative form underscores the decisive role of narrative architecture as an enabling mechanism. Across studies, solutions-oriented information presented without a coherent narrative structure rarely generates substantial cognitive or behavioral effects. By contrast, formal elements such as narrative sequencing, explanatory context, and actionable information consistently function as mediators linking journalistic production to audience outcomes. This pattern clarifies that what distinguishes Sojo is not merely its thematic orientation toward responses but the structural properties through which those responses are communicated. Narrative design, in this sense, operates as a mechanism rather than a stylistic choice, shaping how information is processed and whether it can support civic understanding.

Third, the review highlights structural and organizational constraints as decisive boundary conditions for implementation. Variations in newsroom resources, production routines, professional norms, and platform logics systematically shape whether Sojo can be sustained or scaled. Cross-national differences further indicate that media-system characteristics and sociopolitical environments function as higher-order moderators influencing both adoption and impact. Organizational capacity therefore, determines not only whether Sojo can be practiced but also whether its effects can accumulate socially over time. Institutional feasibility emerges as a prerequisite for impact rather than a downstream consideration, underscoring that journalistic innovation cannot be evaluated independently of material production conditions.

Collectively, these patterns point to a coherent theoretical interpretation: SoJo operates as a conditional, mediated, context-dependent, structurally bounded, and non-linear communicative process. This integrative perspective not only synthesizes previously fragmented findings but also clarifies the mechanisms and limits through which solutions-oriented reporting can generate civic outcomes.

Several limitations qualify for these conclusions. Although the review synthesizes forty-one peer-reviewed studies, the evidence base remains geographically uneven and methodologically heterogeneous, with a predominance of Western samples and short-term experimental designs. The scarcity of longitudinal research restricts inference about sustained effects, while definitional variation across studies limits comparability and may obscure patterns. In addition, publication bias cannot be ruled out, and the restriction to indexed journal literature may have excluded relevant research from underrepresented regions. A further scope condition is the deliberate restriction of the search to the keyword "solutions journalism", which excluded studies operating exclusively under adjacent labels such as constructive or positive journalism. This decision was taken to preserve construct validity and the conceptual coherence of the synthesis, but it implies that the findings refer to the most operationally specific variant of the broader family of solutions-oriented approaches and should not be extrapolated to it as a whole.

These limitations point to clear priorities for future research, including longitudinal designs capable of assessing cumulative exposure effects, cross-national comparative studies examining how local journalistic cultures interact with solutions-oriented reporting, and greater conceptual standardization to facilitate replication and meta-analytic integration. Advancing these directions would allow the field to move from exploratory accumulation toward explanatory consolidation.

The findings also carry practical implications across professional domains. For journalists, they indicate that effectiveness depends not simply on including solutions but on how those solutions are narratively constructed, highlighting the importance of structural storytelling competence alongside evidentiary rigor. For news organizations, the results suggest that institutional support, resource allocation, and incentive alignment are prerequisites for sustainable implementation. For promoters of SoJo, the evidence implies that training initiatives should prioritize structural integration rather than isolated projects. For journalism educators, the review underscores the need to teach not only the normative rationale of solutions reporting but also its narrative mechanics and contextual contingencies.

Taken together, the findings suggest that SoJo should be understood not as a uniform intervention but as a conditional communicative mechanism whose effects emerge only when narrative form, contextual relevance, and institutional feasibility align. Recognizing this conditionality is essential for advancing theory, refining empirical research designs, and guiding responsible professional implementation.

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**Ethics declaration:** This study is a systematic review based exclusively on previously published, peer-reviewed literature retrieved from public bibliographic databases (Web of Science and Scopus). It did not involve human participants, animal subjects, personal data, or any form of primary data collection, and therefore did not require institutional ethical approval. The authors confirm that the review was conducted in accordance with established standards of academic integrity and the PRISMA 2020 reporting guidelines.

**AI statement:** As indicated in the text, the authors used NotebookLM (Google) as a support tool during the data extraction stage to identify information from the 41 included articles through a standardized prompt sequence aligned with the predefined coding template. All AI-generated outputs were subsequently subjected to systematic human verification against the original source texts, and the human coders' judgment prevailed in all cases of discrepancy. In addition, DeepL was used to assist with the translation of selected passages into English, which were afterwards manually reviewed and edited by the authors to ensure accuracy, terminological consistency, and academic register. The authors take full responsibility for the content, interpretation, and conclusions of the manuscript.

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**Data availability:** Data generated or analyzed during this study are available from the authors on request.

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## APPENDIX A

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1. Final selection of the papers analyzed, available on Figshare with <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31328965>
2. Results of the bias analysis with MMAT, 2018, available on Figshare with <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31328971>
3. Details of the methodological approach of the papers examined, available on Figshare with <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31328974>

