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The Art and Strategy of Changing Systems: Part 2

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In my [last post](#), I wrote about two critical dimensions of the strategy of systems change: the kernel of causality that breaks down a large change into pivotal events at a human level; and how this ground-level kernel connects to the higher levels of a complex system. In this second post of three, I focus on two other dimensions of systems change work:

- The dimension of time, and how to navigate the long journeys that are inevitable with any big goal
- Forming a “we” that balances cohesion around a shared purpose and a shared path, reach, and sustainability

Developing distinct disciplines for the distinct time horizons involved in a long journey

Systems change almost always takes a long time. A *strategy* for systems change needs to frame how to pay the right kind of attention to the long arc, and the right kind of attention to the work that can be done now, in today’s conditions and with today’s resources.

Over the past few years, we’ve been working to define several distinct time horizons and establish disciplines that fit the precise nature of each horizon. I’ll use the example of Solutions Journalism Network to illustrate these horizons and disciplines.

The furthest horizon is the domain of **eternal, timeless values**. The team at SJN thinks of journalism as a feedback mechanism that helps societies and communities evolve. That was as relevant in the age of the muckrakers as it is today, and will still be as relevant in the world of 2100. This longest horizon grounds their work in lasting values and principles.

One horizon down, we define the **furthest-out complete-able destination**. Early in their journey, Solutions Journalism envisioned this as reaching a point where the genie would be out of the bottle” for the genre of rigorous reporting about what works. A handful of generations ago, there was no such thing as what we know today as investigative journalism. Once a series of canonical examples had established investigative journalism in the public imagination and once the business and profession of journalism evolved to establish a lasting audience and spread the craft of this form of reporting, this genie could never be put back. A repressive regime might quash investigative journalism inside their borders, but the practice itself can never be put away. SJN is working toward a destination where the genie is all the way out of the bottle, and where the version of solutions journalism that gets woven into the fabric of “how journalism works” is the robust, rigorous, catalytic kind of reporting that their team believes in.

Another horizon down from this furthest achievable destination is what we call an **era**: a roughly two to five year period in the development of an organization or a cause in which a particular set of imperatives need to be achieved. These achievements establish a foundation for future efforts to achieve next order(s) of magnitude of impact and progress toward the ultimate goal. Organizations like Solutions Journalism Network progress through a set of eras, where achieving what is required to “graduate” from the current era paves the way for greater things in the era that follows. (We believe entrepreneurial businesses, for all their differences, similarly develop through a series of eras as we explore in this piece on [strategy for entrepreneurs](#).)

In SJN’s first era, their imperative was to create powerful demonstration cases of “what good looks like” for solutions journalism, showing the impact this kind of reporting can have, and to build a cohesive core of first-rate journalists committed to bringing this new kind of reporting into the world. Early in their development, SJN was able to articulate in a precise way what it would look like to fulfill these imperatives and “graduate” from their first era. They could look ahead to a second era that would have a distinct focus:

In our second era, we will win the fight to establish a standard for what solutions journalism is and how it’s done. We will create a dynamic network, extending over many countries, that enables the successful development of solutions journalism as a practice, achieves much broader exposure/demand, and embeds solution journalism broadly and deeply in important institutional contexts.

Seeing the distinction between Era 1 and Era 2 clearly so early helped the small, committed team at SJN decide where to focus another horizon down, at the level of specific programmatic work that drives toward the larger goal of “graduating” to the next era. For instance, investing in a website curating the best solutions journalism from everywhere wasn’t a priority in Era 1 – and has become a priority in Era 2. In its early days, the team could be laser focused on driving demonstration projects: seminal reporting on education solutions in the Seattle Times, cultivating a small but deeply influential network of early adopters. They knew when and how this would need to shift, and they’ve fluidly adapted to the different pace and nature of building a broader community in their second era.

In many organizations that aspire to drive systems change, we see compelling thinking about a theory of change that focuses on an end state vision, but much less thinking about the series of eras

that will need to be navigated through in order to activate this long-term logic. The most useful kind of theory of change, in our view, is a theory of how a catalyst acting in today's world, with today's limited resources, achieves the breakpoints that make larger change possible, moving outwards in a spiral until the powerful effects of scale begin to operate.

Forming different “we’s” to drive action reflecting the right balance of cohesion, reach and sustainability

Systems change is an expression of collective action, driven in part by agents consciously engaged in driving change, and partly by a collection of actors whose agency, shaped by other purposes, contributes to a wave. Even within the sphere of collective action – some conscious “we” acting toward a meaningfully shared aim – any significant change, will likely require a constellation of groups rather than a single, unified collective. To take Solutions Journalism Network, for instance, important “we’s” include:

- Solutions Journalism Network, the organization: a small group of individuals, some working part-time for the non-profit entity while also working as practicing journalists
- A *community of purpose* made up of individuals who are fiercely committed to a shared vision for how to advance the field of solutions journalism, considering it a primary professional aim. These include not only practitioners, but some of the funders and other actors who feel they have the greatest stake in this movement
- A larger *community of practice* of journalists meaningfully involved in solutions journalism, reading one another's work, participating in conversations and forums about the field, and so on
- Groups within existing entities, like the *Seattle Times*, who each constitute a distinct “we” centrally focused on applying solutions journalism and also anchored in other goals that relate to their native context
- Extended communities whose primary identity isn't connected to solutions journalism (or for the most part journalism at all), but whose engagement is central to how solutions journalism takes shape and spreads – for instance, a large community of teachers, parents, policy-makers and many others concerned with the education system in the city of Seattle, which was the primary focus of the *Seattle Times*' bold initial experiment in applying solutions journalism

These five categories aren't exhaustive, they're simply kinds of “we” that frequently recur in a range of systems change efforts. “Stakeholder mapping” provides only a static picture of a constellation like this – the important questions are about the dynamics of this system, how to create the right transmission among the different “we’s.” For instance, an important early question for SJN was whether the individuals who were part of the “we” in the *Seattle Times* newsroom would become leaders in the broader community of practice. Would the Gates Foundation's experience of the power of what happens in Seattle cause them to identify with solutions journalism as a broader practice, and begin to identify themselves as a member of a community of purpose consciously advancing the field? Would impact on the dialogue on education in Seattle generate engagement

among a different extended “we” of education thought leaders and policymakers, who see the promise of rigorous reporting on what works to cut through traditionally polarized fights about how schools should work?

Three variables critical to solve for in designing related to the “we’s” in system change – whether applied to a single group/organization/coalition or a broader constellation – are cohesion, reach and sustainability. Cohesion represents tightness of alignment on *what*, *why* and critically the *how* that enable a “we” to engage seamlessly and act as one. Reach represents the group’s internal and external resources – its size, its capacity for influence, the many different capabilities it can draw upon. Sustainability represents the degree to which the “we” can maintain over time its internal order and external efficacy. Often sustainability is used to describe an organization’s ability to generate the financial resources required to meet its expenses – but this is really only one aspect of a broader question of what it takes a “we” (which could be a unitary organization, but might be broader) to keep its shape, its focus and its potency. In thinking about the sustainability of the vector of change that Solutions Journalism Network seeks to drive, while the financial health of SJN the non-profit entity is one factor, an even more critical factor is whether journalist-practitioners in the community of practice are perceiving the story opportunities that enable them to dedicate a significant fraction of their energy to solutions journalism, and receiving the support from their editors to pursue those stories at the requisite quality level.

There are often trade-offs among cohesion, reach and sustainability. Organizations with full-time employees often have significant advantages in achieving cohesion, but the costliness of this form can limit reach and make sustainability difficult. One classic pattern here is the organization pursuing system change which grows, becomes dependent on significant inflows of funding, evolves to ensure these funding flows are sustained, and ultimately becomes very cohesive – but in a way that reinforces doing what drives the organization’s own maintenance, rather than driving change in the broader system. At a different extreme, Occupy is a vivid example of an organization that achieved enormous reach, at least in terms of numbers, in breathtakingly little time. This was possible only because the requirements of cohesion were so low. The primary resource Occupy needed to be “sustainable” wasn’t money but voice: speaking out and showing up (or camping out) in ways that established Occupy’s presence. As the initial moment of Occupy passed, the breadth of reach couldn’t be sustained. Not only was the incipient core too fragmented for cohesive, effective action, but the voices that came to exemplify the movement failed to energize a broader public.

In system change work, the choices generally aren’t about “a point” on this balance among cohesion, reach and sustainability, but about an effective portfolio of different “we’s” that balance these considerations differently. The Solutions Journalism Network core organization is extremely cohesive, and small enough that the financial requirements of sustainability aren’t unduly demanding. But considerations of sustainability are central within the context of groups in established news organizations – e.g., readership and public engagement in Seattle that reinforces the value of the solutions journalism. “Reach” considerations like virality are important in establishing core audiences for solutions journalism of different kinds around the country and around the world.

These first two posts focus on the mechanisms by which a system can be changed, the journey to effect this change, and the “we” who undertake this journey. The third and final post will take us closer to the cliff face of driving change, solving the particular “how to” challenges that must be overcome, at any given moment, to move forward - and navigating the inevitable moments in which one gets stuck, stalled in the face of an obstacle one doesn’t know how to overcome.