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## Using stories, narratives, and storytelling in energy and climate change research

Mithra Moezzi<sup>a,\*</sup>, Kathryn B. Janda<sup>b,\*</sup>, Sea Rotmann<sup>c</sup><sup>a</sup> Portland State University, United States<sup>b</sup> University College London, United Kingdom<sup>c</sup> Sustainable Energy Advice Ltd, New Zealand

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## ABSTRACT

Energy and climate change research has been dominated by particular methods and approaches to defining and addressing problems, accomplished by gathering and analysing the corresponding forms of evidence. This special issue starts from the broad concepts of *stories*, *narratives*, and *storytelling* to go beyond these analytic conventions, approaching the intersection of nature, humanity, and technology in multiple ways, using lenses from social sciences, humanities, and practitioners' perspectives. The contributors use stories as data objects to gather, analyse, and critique; stories as an approach to research an inquiry; narrative analysis as a way of crystallising arguments and assumptions; and storytelling as a way of understanding, communicating, and influencing others. In using these forms of evidence and communication, and applying methods, analytical stances, and interpretations that these invite, something new and different results. This essay is a brief introduction to how, in our view, stories and their kin fit in energy and climate change research. We outline the diversity of data, approaches, and goals represented in the contributions to the special issue. And we reflect on some of the challenges of, and possibilities for, continuing to develop 'stories' as data sources, as modes of inquiry, and as creative paths toward social engagement.

### 1. Introduction

In December 2016, Oxford Dictionaries selected 'post-truth' as the word of the year, defining it as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."<sup>1</sup> This definition seems to assume that there is always an objective truth and that this truth is discoverable. While untruth is common, 'truth' is a matter of degree and perspective. As the parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant suggests, multiple interpretations readily exist in many circumstances. Even if several blind men touch one elephant, they can reach different, seemingly objective conclusions about how the whole animal relates to its parts. Humans are not omniscient, and we rarely know everything we might want to, despite the best efforts of science and the Age of Reason. Our understandings of the world are always based on emotion and personal belief, as well as (and sometimes contradicting) physical and

measurable data. How do we balance the presence of multiple interpretations with the need for collective action?

References to narratives, stories, and storytelling have become more common in energy and climate change research and policy (e.g., [1–5]) following a 'narrative turn' in social sciences more generally, as well as dissatisfaction with the dominance of physical, technical, and economic representations [6,7]. Stories are used to communicate with, influence, and engage audiences; they serve as artefacts to be investigated in terms of content, actors, relationships, power, and structure; they can be used to gather information, provide insight, and reframe evidence in ways that more science-ordered formats miss. But they are not benign or neutral, nor a type of data or approach that researchers and practitioners in these fields have much experience with, and there is (understandably) no single identifiable corpus of theories, research approaches, or examples to help order their treatment. So a critical stance is needed. This special issue aims to present and cultivate structures for

\* Corresponding authors.

E-mail addresses: [mithra@pdx.edu](mailto:mithra@pdx.edu) (M. Moezzi), [k.janda@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:k.janda@ucl.ac.uk), [katy.janda@ouce.ox.ac.uk](mailto:katy.janda@ouce.ox.ac.uk) (K.B. Janda), [drsea@orcon.net.nz](mailto:drsea@orcon.net.nz) (S. Rotmann).<sup>1</sup> <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>.<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2017.06.034>

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**Table 1**  
Varied characteristics of stories and storytelling, and of approaches to their analysis.

Aspect	Characteristics (Illustrative Examples)
<b>Stories as Object</b>	
Teller	Individual (including researchers), group, institution, intermediary
Protagonist, characters	Individual, group, thing, system
Energy	Time, technical change, individual change (mind and action), magical transformation
Time realm	History, present, future, out of time, alternative reality
Physical setting	Generic world, specific locality, out of the world, non-physical
Form	Oral short form, written short form, documents, books, images, geographic/space
Truth realm	Fantasy, fiction, individual experience, figurative “truth”, global truth, assumptions, possibility
<b>Using Stories and Storytelling in Research</b>	
Data sources	Participant observation, workshops, interviews, conversations, written documents, newspapers, images, internet sources
Analytical method	Discourse analysis, text analysis, literary, anthropological, folkloristic, policy analysis, sociological, psychological, psychoanalytic, structuralist, performative, group dynamics, proxemics/dramaturgical
Purpose	Data and evidence collection, cultural analysis, policy and science critique, understanding and fostering change, engagement and learning

understanding, interpreting, and applying stories within energy and climate change research and policy by presenting a breadth of analytical approaches, and showcasing projects and research that feature stories or their performance in the energy and climate change fields. As the guest editors for this special issue, we share an interest in stories and storytelling and energy and climate change, but we do not share a common discipline.<sup>2</sup> Our joint lens, therefore, is intentionally more kaleidoscope than magnifying glass. We see stories and storytelling as a potentially important device in helping people from different disciplines and different domains better understand the world and each other in working on applied environmental problems, including by using the storyworld to walk outside normal constraints. In short, we hope to help foster a pragmatic playing field for taking stories and storytelling seriously in energy and climate change research, being realistic about their possibilities, strengths, and pitfalls, while incorporating a multiplicity of approaches, goals, and writers.

This review article does three things in story form. It provides a *beginning*: a brief introduction to stories and storytelling, leading to a selective discussion of the energy and climate change literature on stories. The *middle* introduces the content of the special issue itself, developing a thematic discussion of the papers published in this volume. In the *end*, we reflect on broad results in light of the current literature, practices, and problems of energy and climate change research.

## 2. The beginning: on stories and storytelling

In the beginning, we have to start with problems of definition. When we first developed the concept for this special issue, we envisioned bringing together a diverse set of work constituting, in ensemble, a variety of theoretical groundings on narrative, stories, and storytelling from different disciplines and perspectives, and setting up vocabulary and keywords. While the collection makes progress along these lines, the authors in this special issue use stories and related terms in widely differing ways. Stories are one of the most basic concepts in the world, so this diversity is normal. But few social sciences theorise ‘stories’ *per se* in clear terms. So in this review, we choose ‘stories’ as an umbrella term (when required) to reflect and encompass this diversity. Even in the general written literature, “story” is much more common than

<sup>2</sup> For example, together, Moezzi, Janda & Rotmann have training in statistics, folkloristics, English literature, electrical engineering, energy and resources, environmental chemistry, marine ecology and ethology, and tropical environmental studies. We live or have lived in the USA, France, the United Kingdom, Australia, Austria, Papua New Guinea, and New Zealand. We have all advised policymakers; one of us has *been* a policymaker and energy-efficiency practitioner; one is an International Energy Agency Operating Agent for a demand-side management Task, the other two are engaged in university-based energy research.

‘narrative.’<sup>3</sup>

Others have already given expositions in specific fields providing far more nuance and detail than we can here (e.g., [8–11]). Some of the contributions in this issue provide definitions as well (e.g., [12,13]). What matters, in the sense of this collection, is how the story-related concept or term helps any particular project or research question in ways more technical approaches often do not.

This section first outlines some basic terms and some of the varied ways in which they are used. Second, we single out one form of research on stories (folkloristics, which is the study of folklore), and use this to help map out dimensions and characteristics that underlie diversity in stories, storytelling, and their analysis. Next, we provide a brief and partial review of stories in the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the energy and climate change literature. There should be no expectation of a unified theory on stories in energy and climate change research from this review. It is occasionally said that using stories in social science research is undertheorised or incoherent (e.g., [14,15]). This incoherence may be part of the human condition: that which allows us to be creative as well as replicative, to make art as well as science, to express things that words miss. After all, most stories are supposed to be indirect, artful, and subject to multiple interpretations. That raises, to say the least, myriad questions about how stories and their analysis fit, or complement, ‘science.’ Whatever these questions, we hope that they can be discussed with the positions, principals, methods, and interpretive tools that the papers in this volume refer to and advance.

### 2.1. Definitions and forms

One of the most common definitions of *story* is something with a beginning, a middle, and end. This sounds flippant but can be useful, particularly in defining what stories are not. Drawing from the field of folkloristics, in traditional oral stories, there is generally also a protagonist, usually a human but possibly another animate actor, an object, a practice, or an idea. Then something happens, such as a conflict between protagonist and antagonist, or a transformation, as further developed in Table 1 below. Among the papers of our special issue, ‘stories’ are sometimes used even more generally, e.g., as rationale or narrative explanation of circumstances.

While *narrative* is also a very general term, in the social sciences it is often used to denote non-fiction and constructed, formal, and official cases, e.g. what institutions generate and reflect in general discourse about an issue. These are often present in printed form and written or

<sup>3</sup> Google Books Ngram Viewer (<https://books.google.com/ngrams/info>, English books), generated 6 June 2017. In this corpus, for the year 2000, the term ‘story’ was more than three times more common than frame, narrative, or discourse (which were all nearly equally common).

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