



Original research article

Gathering around stories: Interdisciplinary experiments in support of energy system transitions



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the creative uses of stories and storytelling to engage groups and individuals with consideration of changes in energy systems across time and place. It summarises three story-based experiments that responded to the theme of ‘energy utopias’. These are drawn from the three core strands of a much wider body of work undertaken within the Stories of Change project. This took stories as a central motif and organising device to refresh public and political conversations about energy and decarbonisation. Our hypothesis was that stories could offer a popular and engaging route into thinking about the past and present of humanity’s lives with energy and a lively way of imagining possible futures. We also wanted to test the degree to which stories could offer a shared intellectual space that might support both interdisciplinary and co-productive working for a core team that includes social science, humanities, media, computing and design researchers as well as creative and community partners. The paper considers some of the practical, methodological and theoretical considerations and reflects on the strengths and limitations of stories as both motif and technique in supporting action on climate change.

1. Introduction: stories of change

Climate change represents a major collective risk. However there is a widespread sense that the scale of this peril is not reflected in public or political responses. This paper gives an account of an experimental and interdisciplinary project, Stories of Change, and its approaches to exploring public perspectives on climate change mitigation actions, specifically as they relate to energy systems. The project has been developed and delivered via extensive partnerships with arts and other community partners. ‘Stories’ provided us with a cohesive and productive motif and also a family of techniques around which we could build our project, but this paper seeks to do more than describe a portion of our methodological quilt: it also makes space to reflect critically upon the use of stories and narratives in approaching complex long term issues of public significance.

This first part of the paper introduces the project and the interdisciplinary team. It briefly outlines the approaches taken in our three

‘story’ sub projects based in three locations (London; the English midlands; south Wales) and introduces the Stories web platform (our data repository). The second part expands specifically on the theoretical and methodological footing of the project in stories and narratives. The third part of the paper seeks to illustrate our approach, and some of our learning to date, through an account of work on the theme of ‘energy utopias’. The final, fourth, section offers a discussion of the work and its capacity to inform approaches to energy systems changes, and a conclusion.

The project revolves around the device of ‘stories’, including history, digital storytelling, fictional narratives and future scenarios. It looks at the past, present and future of humanity’s relationship with energy in order to invite more people to engage with change in energy systems. In addition to our ‘standard’ research activity we have developed partnerships with community and arts partners across each of the three strands of the project. Principles of co-production sit at the heart of the research design, introducing challenges but also unpredictable but

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rewarding opportunities. In addition, the project has explicitly sought to extend invitations to participation in complex long-term environmental policy issues beyond existing communities of interest that are convened around energy, environment or climate change themes. This approach was signalled at our launch event, co-organised with Peter Gingold and Mark Goldthorpe of TippingPoint [1] which brought together 150 arts, media, environmental research and policy people for a two-day workshop in Oxford in September 2015.

The different strands of the project set out to invest in experiments that might extend engagement and co-production of research on energy issues. This section briefly summarises the three strands (*Demanding Times*, *Future Works* and *Everyday Lives*), the nature of the team, our varied approaches to co-production and the scope of the activity.

Demanding Times is the strand that explores the past, present and future of energy policy through a body of unusual creative partnerships. It is centred on London. The team for this strand comprises Joe Smith (with a background in environmental social sciences, based in a geography department, also Principle Investigator of this strand and across the project as a whole), Bradon Smith (who explores energy futures from a literary perspective) and, as a consultant, Luke Dickens (a human geographer whose research centres on urbanism, young people and culture). Photographer Tim Mitchell has supported the photography and media training. This strand has worked with young Londoners from the Greater London Authority's Peer Outreach Team (POT), and coached them in climate and energy issues, interviewing and media production. The Peer Outreach Team are generally not in employment, education or training and are drawn from across the London boroughs. The POT have interviewed senior policy and business figures, resulting in a playful inversion of the awkward phrase 'hard to reach communities'. These young Londoners also co-devised, with the academic team, an 'energy questions photo booth' that they used both to take energy-themed portraits of their interview subjects. They also versioned this approach to take it out onto the streets of London to gather vox pops. The POT have gained new skills and understanding, but also generated novel research data and expanded the scope of the project demographically and thematically. In separate but related activity *Demanding Times* has also worked with veteran journalists from the BBC and the Climate News Network [2], and created a context and approach that has supported them in developing factual interviews and stories about energy policy in new ways, including open ended broadcast-style interviews, and investigative but positive case-based storytelling.

The second main strand of the project is titled *Future Works*. The title plays off the fact that 'works' is also the colloquial term for factory or workplace in the English midlands and north of England. This strand explores the future of energy in industrial making in this region. It is sparked by popular interest in industrial heritage and landscape, as well as widespread concern about the future of energy, work and production in a region that is often characterised as the hearthstone of industrial manufacturing. The team comprises architecture and design academic Renata Tyszczyk (Principle Investigator of this strand), historian Nicola Whyte, Joe Smith and architect Julia Udall. *Future Works* has gathered communities together at a series of factory sites in or near the cities of Derby and Sheffield, in the Derwent and Don valleys, to explore accounts of past, present and future energy system changes. The project was developed through connections with three distinctive industry communities that have been under-recognised and under-researched in relation to energy debates: apprentices (through SMEs, University Technical Colleges and the AMRC); employers and employees (through unions, the Chambers of Commerce and businesses, including Gripple Ltd.); and volunteers (through industrial heritage and museum organisations, primarily Derby Museums). It also worked extensively with Masters level architecture students in exploring participatory design methodologies and visualising future energy scenarios for the region.

Future Works convened energy stories (past accounts, present experiences and future projections) with these three communities via

workshops, audio-visual interview, film, performance, scenario-making, participatory mapping and small group discussions – all of which took place at the sites of industry. The intention was to generate a body of energy stories that could support a sense of shared ownership of the dilemmas and choices faced by a range of present-day industries (large or small) with the prospect of a carbon constrained future. The factories involved in the project have shown that they are far from static or stable entities that can be easily directed. Rather, they are part of the change and can be understood as dynamic and evolving. The co-produced creative outputs that explore changes in energy and industry include animator Bexie Bush's short film *the Rumour Mill*, set at the world's oldest continuously running factory on the same site, John Smedley Ltd at Lea Mills, Derbyshire. The film is based on over 60 interviews at the factory and has been made with help from volunteers and Mill workers. Folk singer Lucy Ward has written and performed an EP based on historical material gathered by the team and developed in residencies with project partners and researchers in the Derwent Valley. Photographer Tim Mitchell (also originator of the photobooth concept used across the project) has produced a series of landscapes and portraits that explore themes of energy and change in this charged setting. The project has also captured 3D film in six factories and run future scenario workshops that have included people working in varied roles across the industrial system, from apprentices to researchers in advanced manufacturing to CEOs. These activities have generated rich mappings of possible futures and a body of interviews and 'cloud photo booth portraits' (visible on the Stories of Change Platform [3]). The project has worked in partnership with Derby Museums, and our co-productive research design has shared much in common with their approach to reinventing the Silk Mill industrial museum as a Museum of Making.

The third strand of the project is entitled *Everyday Lives*, and explores the interrelationship between energy and community in South Wales. This work has been led by digital storytelling specialists Karen Lewis and Hamish Fyfe. The team also includes community development specialist David Llewellyn and Rosie Day and Mel Rohse working from a base in geography, and arts partner Yvette Vaughan Jones. The design of this strand is informed by the strong Welsh traditions of poetry and storytelling. *Everyday Lives* has worked with communities that have been formed and shaped by the production of energy resources. The communities of Ynysybwl, Treherbert, Butetown Cardiff, Tairgwaith and Penynglyn have co-produced oral histories, fictional narratives and poetry and shared stories or generated ideas about varied energy futures.

Creative partners Storyworks UK worked with the team and community partners to create temporary 'story studios', including one in an abandoned library. The Story Studios gathered hundreds of community members of all ages and created a powerful space where people could reflect on the centrality of energy in the creation and evolution of their communities. The spaces were decorated with evocative objects and images that could support the unlocking and sharing of stories. People could both listen to and share their own oral histories. Separately the team worked with Welsh and Somali traditions of poetry in the Butetown area of Cardiff – formerly a key site in supporting a huge flow of coal exports from South Wales; and with creative writing in the village of Tairgwaith, proximate to an active opencast mine and a community wind turbine project. In a final piece of work professional writer and actor partners produced a new play for voices, derived from the oral histories and other materials generated from the community research. These threads were gathered together in a celebratory retelling of these stories at an event in the Welsh Assembly, the Senedd, in Cardiff.

The three project strands were supported by an overarching body of work titled *Energetic* which explored theoretical, methodological and thematic questions, and supported training, via seminars and publications. All researchers participated, guided by environmental humanities scholar Axel Goodbody, supported by critic, journalist and geography

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