

THESIS

THE STORY BEHIND THE DECISION:  
THE INFLUENCE OF NARRATIVE IN GATEKEEPING  
BY TRADE MEDIA EDITORS

Submitted by

George Walker Lattimore

Department of Journalism and Media Communication

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Master's Committee:

Advisor: Kirk Hallahan

Marilee Long  
Timothy Amidon

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## ABSTRACT

### THE STORY BEHIND THE DECISION: THE INFLUENCE OF NARRATIVE IN GATEKEEPING BY TRADE MEDIA EDITORS

This study conducted in-depth interviews to understand how 10 trade media editors in the renewable energy industry select articles for publication, how they conceptualize and use narrative as an article form, and the extent to which their conception of narrative affects their decision-making. Four research questions were explored as the focus of the investigation.

While narrative was an important component of trade media offerings, editors did not conceptualize narratives in detail, and the role of narrative varied by publication. Subjective perception, or an editor's gut feeling, was stated as the predominant method for selection among articles and topics; however, participants said their subjective perception was informed by market research and ideas of how the audience will react. Furthermore, the gatekeeping decisions made in the selection and the development stages of the article generation process were highly influenced by the sources of input and mediums of output. Therefore, the gatekeeping decision-making process was described as nonlinear; and a model is presented that reflects the process' complexity.

Most of the editors viewed narrative as being a longer article than other article forms, and therefore, the use of narrative was deemed more appropriate for articles in print where the reader could expect a longer form, such as case studies, company profiles, new market features, and new application or innovation features. The majority of participants expressed narrative was more valuable than other forms, but not necessarily more engaging, due to diverse readership and

reader preferences. Value was attributed to narrative as a form for being more rare than other article types, building reader loyalty, providing variety of article types for the reader to choose between, and ensuring exclusivity of the story from being recreated by other publications. Narrative was not necessarily preferred over article forms, such as summary news reports, for publication, because they may require more work without the guarantee of higher reader interaction or engagement. Findings from these interviews were used to suggest five best practices for publishing narratives in trade media:

1. Establish standards for using narrative by medium and be consistent
2. Incentivize content providers to be aware of the publication's audience and to pitch articles using story types.
3. Encourage readers to share their own narratives to increase engagement and generate exclusive, community-driven content.
4. Look for writers who can balance style and structure with industry information.
5. Use multiple mediums (print and web) to generate complimentary forms of content around a particular theme.

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

“...gatekeepers take on the storyteller’s point of view and are captivated by those elements of experience that display the formal characteristics of stories.”

(Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 44)

### **Overview and Rationale**

In order to compete for readers’ time and attention, trade media editors must do more than merely supply information the reader wants; editors also “must give readers information they do not know they need, as well as interpretation” (Daubert, 1974, p. 63). By acting as the initial interpreter for their audience and by filtering articles and information, trade media editors are storytellers in their own right. The integral, decision-making role of editors as gatekeepers of information has been well documented in research. Gatekeeping as a theory has strong ties to other theories, such as agenda-setting theory, but little attention has been given to how editors filter through potential articles for quality of storytelling.

In his book *Industrial Publicity*, Hart outlines general editorial responsibilities:

The editor’s job is to provide editorial material which will result in the readers’ approbation and will enhance the prestige of the publication. In due course this will influence its circulation, readership and thus advertising revenue. Editors can select from a wide range of sources: items of news, features, specialized stories, off-beat pieces, illustrations and so on. They must provide a good editorial mix. (1971, p. 81)

Stories selected by editors as newsworthy must be important or interesting, with ideal selections being both important and interesting (Gans, 1979). It’s this key element of “interesting” that involves filtering for style and storytelling, requiring editors to act as the initial

audience in order to gauge a story's impact. Literature on narrative theories provides substantial evidence for the power of stories to encourage audience understanding through engagement, with attitude change and persuasion as potential outcomes. Therefore, understanding how editors conceptualize effective storytelling and filter for narrative will help us understand new things about the decision making process that gatekeeping traditionally has not.

Combining technical information with narrative is particularly attractive for trade media that seek to provide in-depth information to a business or industrial community while also trying to relate to their audience through the trends, news, and important issues of their specific industry. Trade media editors' play multiple roles in industry segments, including advocate, advisor, historian, and cheerleader (Hallahan, 2003). They also act as gatekeepers for their particular industry, selecting only a small number of the potential messages for publication, while also shaping the presentation of the content by their preferences for display, timing, and writing style (Shoemaker, 1991).

The literature on media gatekeepers dates back to White (1950) and suggests that their decisions may directly influence how people view social reality (Shoemaker, 1991). In the context of industries, gatekeeping decisions made by trade journal editors may influence how their readers view the social reality of their industry.

Trade editors are also arbiters of news and use many of the same criteria for newsworthiness, searching for what they consider to be good "stories." To some degree, trade editors strive to entertain audiences. As suggested by uses and gratifications theory (Herzog, 1944; Rubin, 1994, p. 420), readers often are motivated primarily by the "purposive," instrumental value of the information they can access in trade media. However, the packaging of information in useful and attractive ways through archetypes such as application stories, case

studies, personality profiles and organizational histories can make information more valuable to users.

Importantly, trade media are profit-making organizations that continue to derive a majority of their revenues from advertising (in addition to conferences, event sponsorships, webinars and web conferences, and other revenue-generating activities) (Daubert, 1974). The staffs of trade media produce their own enterprise stories, but in addition, they are highly dependent upon technical communicators and public relations representatives in their industry to provide content at no charge (Daubert, 1974). Thus much of the material they publish are information subsidies (Gandy, 1982) in the form of exclusive or “special” feature articles provided by industry sources.

### **Study and Research Goals**

Through a series of in-depth interviews with trade media editors, this study analyzed the role narrative plays in their decision-making process as gatekeepers, and how their understanding and use of narrative compares to literature on narrative theory.

Common practices, effective narrative archetypes, and the underlying role of trade media editors as gatekeepers for their industry were explored through in-depth interviews. Most of the research conducted to date on narrative has been audience-focused and post-positivist in approach, using surveys incorporating various scales of immersion and narrative transportation. This study encouraged wider feedback using a much more interpretive approach. The answers collected from editors focused on their view towards storytelling in their trade media and the extent to which they perceive narratives are actually being used.

This qualitative research has the potential to reveal patterns in editorial decision making as filters for narrative and storytelling, and shed light on the potential storytelling techniques that

editors prefer for crafting engaging, memorable technical information. While researchers will benefit from the expanding body of data on narrative theory, the study will also help to describe how editors' choices as gatekeepers affect the way information is shared within a specific industry.

### **Overview of Trade Media**

When defined simply, trade media are specialized, business-to-business publications and websites devoted to providing practical news to their targeted audience in exchange for readership and incidental exposure to advertising. "Designed to give these men and women help in the conduct of their business affairs, these publications are read by representatives of many firms and their subject matter is not restricted to any one company" (Baird & Turnbull, 1961, p. 5). Since this targeted audience shares similar interests and goals within their respective industry, trade media are able to zone in on useful news, information, practices, trends, and fresh ideas that are consistently relevant.

Industry-specific news services date as far back as the sixteenth century in Germany with newsletters from a mercantile cartel sharing price and trade information (Matthews, 1959; as cited by Hallahan, 2003). In America, trade media have traditionally mirrored the growth of emerging industries with around 800 specialized business publications in operation by 1900, continuing to grow past 1,600 by 1925 (Forsyth, 1964; as cited by Hallahan, 2003). In 1998, the Standard Rates and Data Service's listed the total number of trade magazines in the United States to be around 4,500 (Hanson, 1999). By 2006, the number of individual publications had grown to over 9,300 (Gagnon, 2006).

One of the reasons trade media continue to prosper is due to the specific audience they are able to provide to advertisers (Daubert, 1974). Advertisers may be charged a higher rate, but

unlike general magazines with greater subscription sizes, this higher rate is justified by the guarantee that the message will at least reach the intended audience (Daubert, 1974). For the readers, subscription is free for most trade magazines, known as “closed circulation” or “controlled circulation,” since the readers are targeted as qualified leads for advertisers. As defined by The Association of Magazine Media (MPA), controlled circulation is, “The circulation of a magazine that is sent free and addressed to specific individuals who elect to receive the publication” (Glossary, n.d.). Readership for this type of publication is categorized as “vertical,” since subscribers are members of a specific trade or industry. When trade publication subscriptions require payments, the readership is typically categorized as “horizontal” since the audience tends to include those with outside or peripheral interest in the industry as well (Hanson, 1999; Dodds, 1969). It’s important to note that trade media “encompass a comprehensive range of activities, vary greatly in size, scope, authority and in the method of circulation” (Hart, 1971, p. 21).

The functions of trade media can be broken down into four parts: dispersing information, promoting industry, building community, and helping advertisers (Baird and Turnbull, 1961; Daubert, 1974; Hallahan, 2003). First and foremost, trade media must publish content readers “find interesting and useful” (Baird and Turnbull, 1961, p. 52), serving “as an external source of intelligence, enabling channel members to access external, independent information for use in decision-making” (Hallahan, 2003, p. 5). Secondly, trade media promote their industry to boost industry growth. Acting as community news providers, marketplaces for new innovations or services, forums for important issues, idea generators, and watchdogs for unethical practices, trade media provide a vital service to the industry they serve (Hanson, 1999). This relationship is symbiotic in nature, as the publication relies on the sustainable success of their industry for

readership while the industry relies on the trade publication for useful stories, trends, and information. Reflecting this symbiotic relationship, specialized publications are among the first to take losses when economic conditions turn south for their industry (Daubert, 1974, p. 62). Thirdly, trade media also build a community of readers in their industry. “The trade press can be seen as one of a “variety of social mechanisms which reduce differences between individual and organizations and produces a sense of community” (Ouchi, 1981, p. 136 as cited in Hallahan, 2003, p. 8). Lastly, although trade media editors are more concerned with being a useful, authoritative source of information industry professionals can rely upon, trade media do help advertise specific solutions by “matching sellers with potential purchasers” (Hallahan, 2003, p. 5). Through trade media, companies within the industry have the opportunity to present themselves as “experts” and “influencers” by “showcasing proprietary products, special knowledge, or problem-solving capabilities in advertising or publicity” (Hallahan, 2003, p. 14).

Trade media include two types of publishers: magazine publishing firms and trade/professional associations. Trade associations represent the professionals of that industry that pay dues for the association’s benefits. These associations commonly use some type of publication “as their main force for extending their influence,” and “many of them are as elaborate and as skillfully produced as the finest business papers” (Baird & Turnbull, 1961, p. 12). The difference between the content created by independent trade publishing firms and trade associations is the “characteristic of self interest” that ties the publication to the association. “Although many publications are house organs of trade associations, the majority of trade publications are produced by independent publishers, which generate revenues from the sale of advertising, subscriptions, or both” (Hallahan, 2003, p. 2).

Trade media staff rely on various industry sources for information and content. Editors may depend on freelance writers, companies, and public relations/content marketing consultants to provide some content as information subsidies (Baird & Turnbull, 1961; Gandy, 1982). While enterprise stories are regularly produced in-house, editors also rely on outsourcing for writing, story creation, and other services (Hanson, 1999).

The content presented in trade media is often divided into sections, such as feature articles, news articles, letters to the editor, opinion pieces or guest editorials, service pieces, industry news round ups, and case histories. Feature articles, news articles, service pieces, company profiles, case histories, and new product profiles can take on various forms that may employ narrative structure and storytelling. Case histories can be further broken down into “on the scene” articles and are a “staple of most trade magazines,” (Hanson, 1999) that include site visits, project reports, and company profiles. “On the scene” articles focus on supplementing an evaluation of a project, process, or company with practical application useful to the reader, often relying on narrative style and structure to do so.

The importance of storytelling in business, journalism, and research continues to grow. In technical publications such as journals, “integrating a narrative arc... has been promoted as a way to make scholarly writing more engaging.” (Featherstone, 2014, p. 149). In business, storytelling has been recognized as a “key leadership tool” among successful organizations worldwide, with companies such as Nike even employing a “high level ‘corporate storyteller’ to capture and share their most important stories” (Smith, 2012, p. 3). Similarly in research, attention to narrative persuasion has increased, encouraging further examination of recent landmark theories such as narrative transportation theory and its underlying relationship with narrative persuasion (Green & Brock, 2000; Slater & Rouner, 2002; Van Laer et. al., 2014).



## **Connection of Gatekeeping and Narrative**

The research on gatekeepers continues to broaden the conceptualization of influences, processes, and responsibilities for how decision makers select content for publication, and how this content is shaped along the way, “[involving] every aspect of message selection, handling, and control” (Shoemaker, 1991, p. 1). Research has suggested that events and information with attractive messages (vivid details) and narrative structure (“information that can be cast in familiar plots and themes” ((Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 44)) are more likely to be published as news (Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Furthermore, Shoemaker and Vos describe narrative journalism “as an alternative to the inverted pyramid” (2009, p. 188), in which “scenes, anecdotes and dialogue in chronology to build to a climax” (Brookes et al., 1996, p. 375), whereas journalists array facts from most to least important in the inverted pyramid.”

While the influence of message characteristics has been speculated, little research has been conducted to confirm or disprove these speculations, especially in trade media. Vividness and narrative structure are not appropriate for every news article of course, as “narrative structures, such as news stories, can be misapplied to describe experiences” (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 44). Therefore, “studies that compare narrative to non-narrative messages suggest that progress lies in asking when and under what conditions narrative messages are appropriate and what makes them more and less effective” (Bilandzic, 2013, p. 203). This study investigated the influence of narrative from the vantage point of trade media editors.

## **Organization of Thesis**

Through in-depth interviews with trade editors in the renewable energy industry, this thesis examines the role of storytelling in trade media articles, paying particularly close attention to how the conceptualization of narrative in the minds of editors influences the gatekeeping

process. The results of this study make a contribution towards understanding narrative from a practical communication perspective, while also providing insights into the role editors play as gatekeepers in trade media.

Chapter 2 reviews the theoretical framework of the study in three sections: trade editors as gatekeepers, the article selection process, and narrative theory. Chapter 3 describes the methods with cited background, recruitment, participants, and procedures. Chapter 4 presents the results of the research questions, and Chapter 5 discusses the conclusions, implications, suggestions for best practices, suggestions for future research, and limitations.

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents literature explaining the role of trade media editors as gatekeepers, factors affecting the article selection process, and an outline of narrative theory. The chapter then concludes with four key research questions.

### **Trade Editors as Gatekeepers**

**Topic Selection as Foundation for Communication.** Whenever communication occurs between two people, for example, the speaker must make decisions as to what topics are most relevant and how they should be presented. The speaker understands the limited time and cognitive attention available for the conversation and must use some kind of selection process to identify topics. Once a topic has been chosen, the selective focus moves on to identifying key information, since the breadth of potential information is always far too vast to include everything. A skilled communicator chooses the most relevant information wisely, stringing together facts in an engaging, logical form (such as a narrative), while being careful not to overwhelm the listener with trivial details.

**Origins of Gatekeeping Theory.** Understanding how decisions are made in the news is important for the purpose of this study. Selection as a process was identified as an integral part of journalism as early as 1937 (Rosten, p. 255). The concept of gatekeeping as a metaphor for this selection process arrived in 1947 from Kurt Lewin's "Theory of Channels and Gate Keepers," when his partially finished manuscript, "Frontiers in Group Dynamics: II. Channels of Group Life; Social Planning and Action Research" was published posthumously. Lewin recognized that news items moving through communication channels rely on gatekeepers to make "in" or "out" decisions on content. This metaphor opened the door for significant research

to be conducted on the news processes by offering “early communication scholars a framework for evaluating how selection occurs and why some items are selected and others rejected” (Shoemaker, 1991, p. 5).

David Manning White’s classic case study, “The ‘Gate Keeper’: A Case Study in the Selection of News,” (1950) was the first to put Lewin’s theory to the test in a communication’s context. White observed the individual selection decisions made by a newspaper wire editor over the course of a week, discovering a “highly subjective” selection process “reliant upon value-judgments based on the ‘gatekeepers’ own set of experiences, attitudes and expectations.” The wire editor was observed to favor “easier going, more interpretive than statistical” types of stories, and rejected a great deal for being “too vague,” “dull writing,” or “not interesting.” Furthermore, White found no evidence for “conscious choice of news by categories,” yet the editor asserted that categorical decisions did exist as a loose filter mainly “[striving] for variety.” It is also important to note the editor’s only self-identified tools for selection involved “clarity, conciseness and angle,” with White declaring that “all of the wire editor’s standards of taste should refer back to an audience who must be served and pleased.”

**Editors’ Relationship with Readers.** “If an interesting story evokes the enthusiasm of story selectors, it is assumed that it will also interest the audience” (Gans, 1978, p. 155). Editors of trade media, in particular, must be able to effectively evaluate articles from their audience’s perspective if their publication is going to succeed. “[Trade] Publications are judged – sometimes consciously by advertisers, sometimes unconsciously by readers deciding what they want to read – on their editorial quality” (Daubert, 1974, p. 53).

Before any selective decisions can be made, editors may act as the initial audience for article ideas and query submissions, tuning their subjective interpretations to match their

“knowledge of readership” over time (Daubert, 1974, p. 52). Readership loyalty must be earned by consistently publishing “material the readers find interesting and useful” (Daubert, 1974). If editors find an article interesting, “they assume that the audience will respond in the same manner” (Gans, 1979, p. 89). “Reader loyalty – and consequently value of readers – is enhanced to the extent that readers find what they want, and further, that it is readily understandable” (Baird & Turnbull, 1961, p. 335).

“Knowledge of readers’ needs and wants is a prerequisite to reader satisfaction, which in turn sustains the readers’ desire to receive a magazine” (Dodds, 1969, p. 33). For a trade publication to survive, it has been claimed that six editorial characteristics are necessary: usefulness; guidance; brightness (“ability to teach with excitement, enthusiasm and style”); personalization; force (editorial courageousness); and life (ability to make content ‘lively’) (Lanier, in a speech for the American Business Press; as cited by Daubert, 1974, p. 52).

Driven to promote success and the well-being of their respective industries, editors must deliberately and accurately cater to their audience. “Specialized magazines, especially industrial publications, are dependent on the industry they are associated with” (Daubert, 1974, p. 61). Once the publication can prove its audience values the magazine highly enough to actually read and trust in the content, advertisers can then invest with confidence. Editorial characteristics, therefore, determine the value of a publication, preceding the influence of advertising and ultimately determining the publication’s attractiveness to advertisers.

The boundaries of application for the original gatekeeping concept have expanded to include much more than just selection. Donohue, Tichenor, and Olien (1972) broadened the operational scope to include “all aspects of message encoding,” such as “withholding, transmission, shaping, display, repetition, and timing of information as it goes from the sender to

the receiver” (Shoemaker, 1991). Harrower provides more detail for these editorial activities, such as fine-tuning the approach and examining structure and substance for readability, logic, and fairness (Harrower, 2013, p. 54). Under this wider umbrella, each person involved in the media process acts a “gate” responsible not only for evaluating the quality of content, but also for shaping and framing the message towards a favorable audience interpretation.

**Four Basic Ways Articles are Generated.** As described above, the responsibilities of editors as gatekeepers involve more than deciding which articles should be published.

Depending on the route an article takes towards publication, the editor can be directly or indirectly involved with shaping the information and content into various article forms.

Four basic ways trade articles are generated can be summarized as the following: 1) editor-assigned articles “developed in the editorial offices by various editors and staff writers” with parameters for how the article should be written, 2) freelancer-originated articles in which the topic and “treatment” are generally described in a query letter, 3) PR-generated articles from a company inside the industry or another source, and 4) articles from other news sources that can be linked or reposted without permission (Baird & Turnbull, 1961; Hanson, 1999; Hart, 1971).

Editor-assigned articles rely on, “some materials [being] secured by mail or phone call, solicited and unsolicited (publicity releases),” sometimes using “field editors,” or “full-time employees in activity centers” (Baird & Turnbull, 1961, p. 332). Freelancer-originated articles are pitched to the editor using query letters that “follow a fairly standard format.” This format normally includes a lead paragraph followed by an explanation of how the freelancer “will go about researching and what information [he or she] will include in the article,” ending with a simple description of the writer’s past experience (Hanson, 1991, p. 61-62). Editorial subjects for PR-generated articles focus on new products, product applications, non-product innovation, or

other news items, and may result in feature articles (Hart, 1971). These feature articles often involve “a single subject dealt with in depth, either by offering a journalist exclusive coverage of some item, or by getting a member of staff to write an article dealing with a subject more extensively than is possible in a press release” (Hart, 1971, p. 84). It’s important to note that the traditional wall between editorial and advertising content has shifted with the advent of the Internet. As mentioned throughout this study, a “paid client” can be defined as a brand that has partnered with a publisher to have content produced. This content may be in the form of “paid publicity,” PR that allows the brand greater control and may include “sponsored articles,” as well as “native advertising,” “paid ads that are so cohesive with the page content, assimilated into the design, and consistent with the platform behavior that the viewer simply feels they belong” (Native Advertising Playbook, 2013).

News articles from other news sources are sometimes reposted and linked to through the trade media website. The use of this channel depends on the publishing policies of the trade media publication.

### **Article Selection Process**

**Gatekeeping Traditionally Focuses on News Values.** Since 1950, most of the literature on gatekeeping has focused on the selection of news items (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Soroka, 2012), with some studies arguing that “structural constraints” are more important than “personal subjectivity” (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Giddens, 1979; Gieber, 1956). Structural constraints are defined as the sociological forces that shape gatekeeping decisions. Gieber’s findings disagreed with White’s focus on the individual and counterclaimed that editors are “essentially passive” in the selection process since their decisions are quickly overshadowed by rules and routine in a machine-like organization. In response, sociologist Herbert Gans studied newsrooms extensively

before agreeing with Gieber's notion that organizations determine the selection process, and ultimately credited the underlying values of the news in general for influencing organizational gatekeeping practices since "they affect what events become news" (1979, p. 41). Through careful observation, Gans was able to infer a list of these "enduring values," mapping out implicit, idealistic cornerstones of the lens through which society views itself: ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, small-town pastoralism, individualism, moderatism, social order, and national leadership. By doing so, Gans restructured the news as a circular process of story selection composed of two processes: the availability of news from a source perspective, and the suitability of news from an audience perspective. Gans further describes story selection as a "hurried" process with journalists making "quick, virtually intuitive judgments," based on "feel" so that "choices can be made without too much deliberation" (p. 82).

**Newsworthiness.** The higher levels of influence as well as the arrival of idealistic "enduring values" (Gans, 1979) encouraged further research to examine gatekeeping based on "newsworthiness." In other words, what specific categories of content are editors looking for as they make gatekeeping decisions? Furthermore, what types of news attributes do their audiences expect? While there is no official list of newsworthy characteristics, a general consensus can be reached by observing the commonalities between many credible lists. These lists generally attribute newsworthy content as possessing the following qualities to the reader: timeliness (how recent); proximity (psychologically; geographically); importance, impact, or consequence (how much it matters); human interest; conflict or controversy (how dramatic); sensationalism (how exaggerated); prominence (how well known); and novelty, oddity, or the unusual (Hough, 1995; Itule & Anderson, 2007; as cited in Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Internalized through routine and



socialization (Breed, 1955; Tuchman, 1978) and stemming in part from “assumptions about the audience,” “standardized news values are used to determine what will pass through the gate” (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 82).

**Importance and Interestingness as Criteria.** Newsworthiness, however, is only partially effective for predicting story selection, because ultimately, “only people can decide whether an event is newsworthy” (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 41-42). Furthermore, the newsworthiness of any article can be boiled down into two general principles. News should always be “important” or “interesting” to the audience, with “the ideal being an important story that is also interesting” (Gans, 1979, p. 147).

Interesting content attracts readers through engagement and retains their attention, while important content provides information the reader can use. For trade media, “the reason most readers want these publications is to help them do something better or make it more interesting” (Daubert, 1974, p. 60). In relation to this, vulnerability to competition can be measured by the extent to which a publication’s appeal can be “easily profiled” and reproduced. This means editorial characteristics that form unique bonds with readers’ expectations, such as “a desire to be entertained while being informed,” encourage the editor to act as a storyteller (Daubert, 1974, p. 63).

In his book *Writing for Trade Magazines*, Hanson outlines the need for a variety of interesting article formats in trade media:

Since the most basic job of any editor is to provide subscribers with information they want to read, the true “art” of editing is to find and develop information in an interesting, even entertaining, format... Put another way, a variety of story types is the best way to deliver

information. Some readers like news, some like to read about the experiences of others, some like to have just the nuts and bolts they need to perform a task. (1999, p. 30)

**Other Content/Message Considerations.** As a reminder, most of the literature to date on gatekeeping has focused on topic selection (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Soroka, 2012). For trade media editors, there are many types of message characteristics specific to each publication that influence article selection besides the topic, such as the variety of topics in a publication or website, space left in the publication, length of the article, and visuals (Dodds, 1969; Baird & Turnbull, 1961). Besides these factors, other message characteristics have recently been presented in research that can influence gatekeeping decisions.

***Message attractiveness.*** In their revised study on gatekeeping published in 2009, Shoemaker and Vos assert that, “Newsworthiness is not the only judgment that gatekeepers make about events” (p. 43). Shoemaker and Vos expand gatekeeping influences to include message attractiveness and narrative structure, explaining messages with these characteristics “are more likely to enter a channel” (p. 43). Message attractiveness describes the vividness of information, events, and issues through concrete, first-hand details that can prompt cognitive images. Vivid information lends itself to narrative storytelling as it “grabs hold of the imagination and is exciting, whereas pallid information is dry and unappealing” (p. 43). Nisbett and Ross further explain vividness as information that is “likely to attract and hold our attention and to excite the imagination to the extent that it is (a) emotionally interesting, (b) concrete and imagery-provoking, and (c) proximate in a sensory, temporal, or spatial way” (1980, p. 45). In opposition to vividness, “aggregated, statistical, data-summary information is... likely to lack concreteness and emotional interest,” and therefore is less likely to be remembered (Nisbett & Ross, 1980, p. 55).

***Narrative structure.*** Interrelated with message attractiveness, narrative structure is said to influence gatekeeping decisions as well. Gans recognized the influence of narratives on story selection by describing news in a narrative format as highly preferable for gatekeepers, as stories without a point or an ending “can fall by the wayside” (1979, p. 162). Bennett furthers this sentiment for the importance of storytelling in news selection by proposing that items become news when inflated for drama, showcasing “classic dramatic fare, with rising action, falling action, sharply drawn characters, and of course, plot resolutions” (1988, p. 24). Shoemaker and Vos echo Gans and Bennett by asserting information and “items that lend themselves to storytelling are more likely to make it past the gate” (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 44).

***Argumentative vs narrative.*** The argumentative format, on the other hand, is commonly used in order to promote analytical attention to the central arguments of the message. For articles with overtly persuasive intent (e.g. opinion pieces, editorials, non-narrative testimonials), facts may be presented to appeal to the reader’s sense of logic as they build up to a conclusion or call to action. The article itself may be presented in the structure of an inverted pyramid news story, a traditional persuasive essay (with introduction, arguments conclusion), or a summary of contrasting pros vs. cons, etc. By contrasting the desired viewpoint or action against the alternative, the reader is encouraged to agree with the author without engaging in the emotional, immersive experience that often accompanies a well-written narrative. For persuasive content, argumentative forms rely on making objective claims “by invoking the rhetorical form of an argument” (Deighton, et. al., 1989, p. 337). “Although an argument may generate counterargument, it must also evoke positive beliefs if it is to be persuasive.” Drama, on the other hand, often exists in narrative, appeals to personal experience and subjective testing, and

“must evoke expressions of feeling and meet the test of verisimilitude and plausibility of the depicted events” in order to be persuasive.

While, “advocacy messages rather than narrative messages have been the subject matter of persuasion scholars for the past half-century,” (Green & Brock, 2000, p 701) narratives are now being acknowledged as a separate persuasive route that “may have [a] greater impact than nonnarrative modes” (Green & Brock, 2000, p. 702). In 2013, however, Bilandzic and Busselle presented that, “narrative persuasion may not be a mutually exclusive alternative to other persuasive, rhetorical forms” (p. 200). Instead, it’s important to consider that for the practicality of news content, for instance, “an argument may contain information, such as an example which audience members may process the same way they do narrative information,” and, “similarly, a narrative may contain persuasive information that takes the form of an argument or claims of evidence” (p. 200). Further complicating the matter, it should be noted that the reader’s, “awareness of persuasive intent, in turn, is an important determinant of resistance” (p. 204).

***News article structures.*** For breaking news, the most commonly used article structure is referred to as the inverted pyramid, where paragraphs are packed with key facts and arranged in descending order of importance (Harrower, 2013). The inverted pyramid is used for its practical convenience as well as its familiarity to readers, but other article structures may cater more easily to storytelling. The martini glass begins the same as the inverted pyramid, with a story summary that includes the most important facts, before shifting into a chronological narrative that walks the reader through the story, step by step, ending with a twist if possible. The martini glass is commonly used with crime, disasters, or other dramatic stories where the order of events is important.

Another storytelling-friendly structure in news is the kabob. Beginning with a quote or anecdote about a specific person, the kabob structure then broadens into the general topic at hand before returning to the original person, and works well for stories on trends or events depicting how actual people are affected (Harrower, 2013).

### **Narrative Storytelling/Persuasion Theories**

Narrative and the effects of storytelling have become a hot topic in research, crossing over into new realms of application and theory. Narrative theories describe the impact of narrative structure and style, telling us that the way content is shaped affects the audience. As opposed to other forms of content that seek solely to inform and/or persuade, such as argumentation that relies on the logic, credibility, and empirical proof of evidence and statistics, narrative relies on other unique factors to influence the audience (Bruner, 1986; Wells, 1988). Effective drama, or storytelling, evokes emotion and engagement with the plot and characters, while elaboration, or argumentation, “leads to attitude change via logical consideration and evaluation of arguments” (Green & Brock, 2000, p. 702; Deighton et al., 1989; Wells, 1988).

Literature has shown that “an audience’s response to a presentation is shaped by its form,” yet it’s difficult to pinpoint exactly what it is about the form of narrative that affects humans so deeply (Deighton et. al., 1989, p. 341). “Stories are not merely to entertain the listeners, they may also have persuasive functions, and more generally, they may contribute to the reproduction of knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, ideologies, norms, or values of a group or of society as a whole” (Mumby, 1993, p. 125).

In Bilandzic’s *Handbook of Persuasion* (2013), narrative is broadly defined in two ways: a plot-focused “symbolic representation of events”, or alternatively as an experiential “portrayal of the inner world of a character.” In the former definition as a symbolic representation of events,

Bilandzic explains that narrative does not require humans, simply “the suggestion of a character or characters and the representation of an event or events” (see Abbot, 2002). In the latter, experiential definition, a plot is not required, simply a character’s “views, perspectives, emotions, motivations, or goals” (see Fludernik, 1996). Escalas, Moore, and Britton lean towards the definition of narrative as a symbolic representation of events, defining narrative structure as chronology and causality formed by “[linking] goals, actions, and outcomes over time” (2004, p. 108). Bennett goes a step further in defining the symbolic representation of events, stating, “every story should have structure and conflict, problem and denouement, rising action and falling action, a beginning, a middle and an end” (1973, p.153). As opposed to a singular incident used to illustrate a point or represent a particular aspect of something or someone, known as an anecdote, narratives have a longer structure in which a problem is overcome, or a mystery is solved, through a beginning, middle, and an end (Booher, 2015).

**Establishing Boundaries.** Literature on narrative theory explains how stories provide boundaries “for what is thinkable, doable, possible, and valued” for cultural members, enabling and constraining a society’s or industry’s ideas for what is valid while leaving out what is not (Mumby, 1994, p. 145). These boundaries therefore not only channel the audience’s perception but also highlight certain events, practices, and details “through vivid, detailed, or emotionally compelling descriptions” (Mumby, 1993, p. 109).

As authority figures in news media, journalists’ legitimacy is partially based on their rhetoric and social competency (Mumby, 1993, p. 189). Audience-specific vocabulary tends to be used that establishes journalists’ credibility while channeling the audience’s perception. Inclusive for those in the same field or industry, this vocabulary implies meaning through socially constructed definitions (Mumby, 1993, p. 109). Narratives channel audience attention to

the most important values and events by framing and using socially exclusive language (Beyer, 1981; Starbuck, 1976; Weick, 1979; as cited in Mumby, 1993). These values represent how a field or industry self-reflects, and provides a platform for what is socially constructed as valuable going forward.

**Engagement.** Reading stories requires active participation from the reader. Described as “imaginal elaboration” by Mazzocco and Brock (2006) and “realization” of the story by Oatley (2002), active participation implies that the audience must exert a greater amount of energy in order to recreate the story in their minds. This level of participation correlates to cognitive and emotional engagement in which “people experience thoughts and emotions implied by the story, and in doing so, simulate the story in their minds” (Bilandzic, 2013, p. 213).

One advantage of narrative over argumentative lecture is that drama “can depict the experience directly, with the aim of evoking the feeling itself in its audience” (Deighton, 1989, p. 336). A compelling story encourages the reader’s imagination to act out the “the meaning of the drama,” engaging directly with the plot, characters, and purpose in the process (Iser, 1978; as cited in Deighton, 1989). A high level of engagement is the gateway to further effects, such as learning comprehension and memory retention.

***Comprehension and memory retention.*** The potential utility of narrative extends far beyond mere entertainment when the “principal purpose [is] to understand complex matters... people, their actions, and their interactions” (Oatley, 2002, p. 41). As a result of engagement, narrative can be used as a platform to organize and assimilate unfamiliar, complex information. Evidence of educational utility is “supported by the fact that stories are more easily remembered than abstract principles,” as “story events and characters are linked with each other through personal, causal, temporal, and spatial associations, which facilitate retrieval of more complex

sequences” (Schank & Abelson, 1995; Green & Brock, 2005). In other words, it’s easier to remember a narrative than a list of facts, especially when the facts are highly technical (Green & Brock, 2005). The structure of the story acts as a framework in the mind of the reader, compacting “a dense array of social information” through events in the plot as the reader “vicariously experience[s] the characters’ fate” (Bilandzic, 2013, p. 213).

Whether being used to educate elementary students in history class or working professionals trying to stay abreast on the latest industry practices, narratives “are vehicles for making new information recognizable... linking the unknown to the known and permitting comparison” (Petraglia, 2007, p. 496). The value of the interwoven information is further enhanced by the stories themselves, allowing readers to understand other people’s motivations, thoughts, and feelings. In summary, “this simulation facilitates the communication and understanding of social information and makes it more compelling, achieving a form of learning through experience” (Oatley & Mar, 2008, p. 173).

**Narrative persuasion.** Research has shown narrative to have a strong influence on attitude change, persuasion, and behavior change (Wells, 1988; Deighton, 1989; Green & Brock, 2000). Narrative persuasion, as opposed to argumentative persuasion used in “most lessons in science books, news reports, and speeches,” appeals to the audience’s emotions as well as cognition, allowing the audience to see others perspectives through storytelling (Van Laer et al., 2013, p. 800). “Ultimately, narrative persuasion can be defined as any influence on beliefs, attitudes, or actions brought about by a narrative message through processes associated with narrative comprehension or engagement,” (Bilandzic, 2013, p. 201).

When presented with persuasive intent through an argumentative or lecture format, the audience may “occupy their minds with other matters, discount part or all of the evidence,



derogate the source, or counterargue every point” (Wells, 1988, p. 15). In trade media, industry professionals may have strong opinions on best practices and technologies that can be counter to the perspective presented in a trade article, making narrative persuasion an alternative solution for editors since “dramas do not depend on direct address; they present object lessons” (Wells, 1988, p. 15). By presenting the actions of characters for readers to review, “narratives frequently embed exemplars – concrete, situated examples of action, and the consequences of action, that model correct and successful choices about behavior” (Mumby, 1993, p. 107).

Character identification, unifying structure, verisimilitude, and imagery are heavily linked with engagement, and have been presented in narrative research as tools for persuasiveness. Furthermore, the concrete information used in personal stories provides indirect “supporting ‘evidence’ for a more general, argumentative conclusion” (Mumby, 1993, p. 126).

***Character identification.*** Research has shown that the more the audience identifies with the characters, the more likely the audience is to experience a change in cognition (Banerjee & Greene, 2012), attitudes (de Graaf, Hoken, Sanders, & Beentjes, 2011; Igartua & Barrios, 2012), interpersonal discussion (Sood, 2002), and actual behavior (Moyer-Guse, Chung, & Jain, 2011; as cited in Murphy, 2013). Identification results from feelings of similarity, familiarity, or admiration towards a character or characters, increasing levels of engagement, self-efficacy, and potential for persuasion (Moyer-Guse, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002; Murphy, 2013). When a story presents “feature characters with whom the target audience can identify,” the opportunity to see a new perspective is encouraged (Murphy, 2013). Bandura’s social cognitive theory asserts the idea that besides learning from direct experience, people also learn from observing others and in turn, are more likely to model the perceived behavior (Bandura, 2004). Transitional characters involve a change of behavior, typically beginning with negative behavior that turns into

rewarded, positive behavior (Bandura, 2004; Sabido, 2004; Bilandzic 2013). If persuasion is a desired outcome, transitional characters can be strategically positioned in the narrative so that the audience may understand the character's motivations towards the favorable behavioral change (Singhal & Rogers, 1999; Bilandzic, 2013).

***Unifying structure.*** While slight differences of narrative's definition exist in literature, setting, participants, and actions, whether explicit or implicit, imply meaningful relationships between ideas and information (Mumby, 1993). For this reason, the semantic structure of stories can be interpreted as a model in itself, "richer" than descriptions of models by incorporating personal interpretation and opinion into the order of events (Mumby, 1993, p. 125). Therefore, "narrative is seen as an effective tool for accomplishing community and authority and a means of maintain collective codes of knowledge" (Mumby, 1993, p. 190).

Relevant to editorial decisions of narrative impact, research has argued that specific emotions should be paired with specific plot types (Lazarus, 1999). For trade magazines in particular, this implies narratives can "humanize... facts by viewing the event through someone's eyes, embellishing the drama and appealing to our emotions" (Harrower, 2013, p. 123). When done effectively, these "rare" but "wonderful narrative stories" reward the reader's time and energy with relevant, practical information they can apply in the workplace (Harrower, 2013, p. 51).

***Verisimilitude and imagery.*** Verisimilitude is often talked about in narrative research and is defined as the extent to which a drama satisfies the viewer's standards for "what seems right" (Wells, 1989). This means that the setting, events, and character actions in a story are consistent with grounded boundaries, enabling the audience to invest in the drama. In terms of persuasion,

“when verisimilitude is high, the audience may not, in fact, even notice that a claim is being made” (Deighton et al., 1989, p. 337).

Imagery is another stylistic element of narrative that influences the vividness of a story and encourages engagement. “Writing that appeals to the senses – that creates more mental pictures, aromas, and sensations – is more memorable and more appealing; it transports the audience to the scene of the message” (McAdams & Yopp, 1996, p. 146). It’s important to recognize that imagery is not a direct requirement for narrative engagement, but it “may provide the basis for readers and viewers to react emotionally, to engage with the narrative and care for the characters, and subsequently for narrative effects” (Bilandzic, 2013).

### **Research Questions**

Of particular interest in this study is learning trade editors’ preferences regarding the use of narrative. Based on the preceding literature review, the objectives in this study are to determine the extent to which trade editors filter for narrative style and/or structure, and to explore the conceptualization of storytelling in trade media. Four research questions were the focus of the investigation.

*RQ1, Trade article development: How do trade editors go about developing and selecting a good article? In particular, do they rely on their own subjective perception to gauge the impact, ideas of audience reactions, insights from market research, or something else?*

This question looks at the story selection process from a practical standpoint within trade media. Gatekeeping research has traditionally debated the appropriate level of influence to analyze the story selection process (individual, routine, organizational, etc.), as well as the level

of audience influence, and this question focuses the debate on modern trade media. This question has the potential to reveal a structure for gatekeeping practices among trade media editors.

*RQ2, Article conceptualization: What do editors understand about the value and role of narrative and storytelling? In particular, what is the relation between an article's importance versus its interestingness?*

The researcher wants to know if trade editors approach a potential article with preferences in mind, and how they balance the importance of an article's topic and information with the way it is told. The importance of topic selection has been well documented in gatekeeping research, yet much less attention has been devoted to the qualification of interestingness in regards to news selection. Understanding of the value of narrative will be compared with narrative theory.

*RQ3, Importance of message characteristics: What types of information lends itself to narrative form? When is the use of narrative elements appropriate for news articles?*

Message characteristics such as vividness and narrative structure have been included as influencing forces in recent gatekeeping studies; this question seeks to answer how trade editors view storytelling elements, what types of information are appropriate for narratives, and when narratives are appropriate for news articles in trade media. Answers to this question will shed light on the level of detail to which trade editors ascribe the effectiveness of storytelling to various elements.

*RQ4, Preferences and Perceptions: When dealing with persuasive content, do trade editors prefer narrative to argumentative style? In particular, what are their perceptions about narrative in relation to argumentative style?*

This question uses research on narrative persuasiveness to analyze trade editors' preferences for persuasive content. In trade media, content submitted from companies and PR firms seeks to influence readers' attitudes towards specific products, technologies, and practices, and editors have to use editorial discretion and shaping techniques in order to provide readers with useful information. As stated in the trade media functions in Chapter 1, editors are more concerned with providing the solutions and information that readers will find useful, than providing specific solutions from advertisers. Narrative theories explain the fundamental benefits of storytelling as a separate route to persuasion than the argumentative style. This question seeks to explore whether trade media editors agree with narrative theory in regards to persuasion, and if they prefer to shape persuasive content into narrative structure over argumentative structure.

## CHAPTER 3. METHODS

To investigate these research questions, a series of in-depth telephone interviews were conducted with trade media editors in the renewable energy industry. Trade media were chosen due to the unique combination of technical and practical information, the use of directive storytelling, and because trade media have historically received less research attention than other news outlets. Trade media are also of special interest to the researcher because of his aspirations to begin a career in technical communication.

### **Selection of Industry**

The renewable energy industry also was of special interest to the researcher, the topical importance of and interest in alternative energy, and the likelihood of a persuasive and interesting nature of content submitted to editors pertaining to new technology and practices. Among renewable energy sub-industries, solar photovoltaic supports the most jobs and is the fastest growing sub-industry of renewable energy in 2017, according to the *2018 Annual Review* by the International Renewable Energy Agency. As stated in the *2018 Annual Review*, the renewable energy industry as a whole continues to grow worldwide, increasing 5.3% in 2017 to employ 10.3 million people. As the largest renewable technology sector, the solar photovoltaic industry achieved record installations in 2017, growing by almost 9% to employ 3.4 million people. Therefore, renewable energy media that publish articles on solar were focused on to narrow the scope and increase homogeneity within the sample.

It's important to note that there are a wide variety of sub-industries involved with renewable energy, and trade media publications reflect that diversity. While solar was the focus

of this study, hydropower, bioenergy, wind energy, and other sub-industries exist under the renewable energy umbrella as well, but were avoided for recruitment.

### **Choice of Research Method**

In-depth interviews were chosen as the most appropriate method for this grounded theory study because the research is exploratory in nature. Due to the lack of specific research on this topic, intensive interviews will provide grounding for future research.

Kvale and Brinkmann (2008, p. 3) describe in-depth interviewing as a process “with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena.” In-depth interviews generally focus on small samples, encourage detailed background and full responses, and allow for customization to individual interviewees (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014).

As the editorial leaders of their respective publication, editors screen and develop content from the audience’s perspective. For this reason, interviewing editors to determine the use of narrative within their article selection process was a natural approach. In-depth interviews allow the researcher to probe editors for insights.

### **Recruitment and Selection of Participants**

Recruitment was conducted through email using materials approved by Colorado State’s Institutional Review Board, beginning with a pre-approved email message (Appendix A). Editors who responded via email received a response seeking to set up arrangements (if accepted) or acknowledging receipt of their email (if declined (Appendix B)). Follow-up calls were made to editors who did not respond, and these calls followed an IRB-approved script (see Appendix C). Editors who agreed to be interviewed received a confirmation email that confirmed arrangements and, importantly, included key points required by IRB (Appendix D).

A convenience sampling procedure was employed that included editorial personnel from renewable energy trade media published in English, and focused on solar technology. The researcher examined copies or print issues or online websites to pre-screen each potential trade media publication to ensure that it focused on solar media and published news articles. Publications that focused solely on wind, hydro, gas, or other renewable energy sub-industries were omitted. Technical journals solely detailing design and engineering issues were avoided as well to ensure that the trade media published news articles targeted to the industry as a whole. With news publications everywhere migrating online to websites, the researcher recruited trade media publishing online as well as in print.

Potential renewable energy trade publications were identified employing keyword searches in two major media directory databases. MeltWater's large database of web-based media contacts ([www.meltwater.com](http://www.meltwater.com)) is meant as a tool for journalists to connect with contacts based on topic, and was filtered using "editor" initially, followed by "renewable," "sustainable," and "energy" in order to locate appropriate publications through their keyword descriptions. In the Cision media relations database ([www.cision.com](http://www.cision.com)), the solar industry was targeted and resulted in eight additional trade publications. Similar to MeltWater, Cision is a powerful database updated daily for journalists to find contacts based on topic. Searching "renewable energy trade publications" through Google added several more relevant trade publications.

By scanning articles online and finding at least one example of narrative use, each included publication was paired with an article using narrative in some form. The researcher looked for articles that included the following descriptions of narrative: "structure and conflict, problem and denouement, rising action and falling action, a beginning middle and an end," "raises unanswered questions, unresolved conflicts, and/or depicts not yet completed activity,"



chronology and causality formed by “[linking] goals, actions, and outcomes over time,” “rising action, falling action, sharply drawn characters, and of course, plot resolutions” (Bennett, 1973, p. 153; Escalas et al., 2004, p. 108; Deighton et al, 1988, p. 24).

All trade media included have content published online, with some having both print and online content. Editorial positions held by participants were limited to the top (editor-in-chief/publisher), second- (senior editor), or third-level (managing editor) editorial decision-maker to ensure decision-making authority was adequate. Job titles varied at the publications discretion and required attention to each publication’s staff hierarchy.

The researcher’s search resulted in 22 potential trade media publications, but it should be noted that there are other renewable energy publications the researcher did not come across initially. Using the pool of 22 identified publications, the goal was to conduct semi-structured interviews with the editors over the phone. Table 1 provides the list of editors and publications that were interviewed. All participants were given the option of remaining anonymous, but agreed to allow their name and affiliation to be used. A brief profile of each participant follows, ranked by known print circulation:

**Table 1. List of Study Participants**

| <b><u>Editor’s Name</u></b><br>[Title] | <b><u>Publication</u></b>     | <b><u>Circulation</u></b><br>[Paid Circulation vs<br>Controlled]                              | <b><u>Online vs Print</u></b><br>[Independent vs<br>Association]<br>*[Mainly Solar vs<br>Includes Solar] |
|----------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| John Howell<br>[Editorial<br>Director] | <i>JustMeans</i>              | 200,000 bi-Weekly<br>Enewsletter<br><br>[not controlled]                                      | Online only<br>[Independent]<br>*[Includes Solar]                                                        |
| Jennifer Runyon<br>[Editor-in-Chief]   | <i>Renewable Energy World</i> | 52,000<br>6x a Year Online<br>Mag;<br>[not controlled]<br><br>60,000 bi-weekly<br>Enewsletter | Online only<br>[Independent]<br>*[Includes Solar]                                                        |

|                                                      |                                                       |                                                                                                   |                                                   |
|------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
|                                                      |                                                       |                                                                                                   |                                                   |
| Trevor Galbraith<br>[Editor-in-Chief]                | <i>Global Solar &amp; Alternative<br/>Energies</i>    | 24,000 Daily<br>Enewsletter<br>*Print Circulation N/A<br>[Controlled]                             | Both<br>[Independent]<br>*[Mainly Solar]          |
| John Parnell<br>[Head of Content]                    | <i>PV-Tech Power</i>                                  | 22,000 Quarterly<br>Print;<br>[controlled]<br><br>11,600+ Daily<br>Enewsletter                    | Both<br>[Independent]<br>*[Mainly Solar]          |
| David Brearley<br>[Senior Technical<br>Editor]       | <i>SolarPro</i>                                       | 18,000<br>6x a Year Print<br>[controlled]                                                         | Both<br>[Independent]<br>*[Mainly Solar]          |
| Kathie Zipp<br>[Managing Editor]                     | <i>Solar Power World</i>                              | 13,000 bi-Monthly<br>Print<br>[controlled]                                                        | Both<br>[Independent]<br>*[Mainly Solar]          |
| Chris Crowell<br>[Managing<br>Editor/Only<br>Editor] | <i>Solar Builder</i>                                  | 10,000<br>6x a Year Print;<br>[controlled]<br><br>6,400 Weekly<br>Enewsletters                    | Both<br>[Independent]<br>*[Mainly Solar]          |
| Anne Fischer<br>[Managing Editor]                    | <i>Solar Novus Today</i>                              | Online monthly,<br>Newsletter bi-monthly<br>[not controlled]                                      | Online only<br>[Independent]<br>*[Mainly Solar]   |
| Julia Pyper<br>[Senior Editor]                       | <i>Greentech Media (GTM)</i>                          | *Circulation<br>Requested<br><br>[not controlled, but<br>there's premium<br>membership available] | Online only<br>[Independent]<br>*[Includes Solar] |
| Carly Rixham<br>[Editor/<br>Executive<br>Director]   | <i>American Solar Energy<br/>Society: Solar Today</i> | *Circulation<br>Requested<br>[controlled]                                                         | Both<br>[Association]<br>*[Mainly Solar]          |

**John Howell** is the Editorial Director of *Just Means* and has been working for Just Means for seven years. *Just Means* is a subset of 3BL Media, LLC and is 13 years old with only

a few staff members in-house. They use a combination of PR sources, freelancers, and contributors to generate content for “business professionals, executives, journalists, bloggers, academics and news organizations” who are interested in “corporate social responsibility, sustainability, energy, health, education, technology and innovation.”

**Jennifer Runyon** is the Editor-in-Chief at *Renewable Energy World* and has been working there for 10 years. *Renewable Energy World* is a part of PennWell’s Global Power Group and is 10 years old with seven staff members in-house. They use a combination of PR sources, contributors, and freelancers to generate content for renewable energy industry professionals.

**Trevor Galbraith** has been the Editor-in-Chief of *Global Solar and Alternative Energies* (GSAE) for seven years. They use PR sources and contributors to generate content for solar industry professionals around the world.

**John Parnell** has been the Head of Content at *PV-Tech* for four years. They publish two print magazines as well as online content to “over 12,500 decision makers and implementers responsible for producing solar cells, modules, thin films and utility-scale power plants.”

**David Brearley** is the Senior Technical Editor at *Solar Pro*, and has been working there for 10 years. *Solar Pro* has three staff members in-house and currently publish a print magazine six times a year as well as online content to “more than 20,000 professionals working in the North American solar market.” *Solar Pro* uses contributors and “technical content” from PR sources to deliver content on the “best practices for utility, commercial and residential system design and deployment.”

**Kathie Zipp** is the Managing Editor at *Solar Power World* and has been working there for seven years. *Solar Power World* has three staff editors in-house and is a brand of WTW

Media LLC, and is published alongside four other trade magazines with focuses on wind power, fluid power, engineering, and medical. *Solar Power World* uses a combination of PR sources and contributors to generate content for solar industry professionals, focusing on “solar contractors” in particular.

**Chris Crowell** is the Managing Editor of *Solar Builder* and has been working there as the sole editor for two years. *Solar Builder* is a subset of CFE Media and is 4 years old with only a few staff members in-house. They use a combination of PR sources, freelancers, and contributors to generate content for solar industry professionals.

**Anne Fischer** is the Managing Editor of *Solar Novus Today*, and has been working there since it started seven years ago. *Solar Novus Today* is a subset of Novus Media Today and is seven years old with 10 staff members in-house. They use a combination of PR sources, freelancers, and contributors to generate content for solar industry professionals.

**Julia Pyper** has been the Senior Editor at *GreenTech Media* for three years. *GreenTech Media* is a renewable energy website that’s 10 year old with five full-time staff members in-house. *GreenTech Media* uses “journalists and a global network of expert contributors, supported by a team of analysts from our market intelligence arm, GTM Research” to deliver “market analysis, business-to-business news and conferences that inform and connect players in the global clean energy market.”

**Carly Rixham** is the Executive Director of The American Solar Energy Society and has been the Editor, Art Editor, and Publisher at *Solar Today* for two years. *Solar Today* is the The American Solar Energy Society’s publication, and is 30 years old with six staff members in-house. They currently publish a quarterly print magazine as well as online content, and use

around 12 contributors to “deliver information on lifestyle trends, technology and analysis to the sustainability community.”

### **Interview Guide**

The interview protocol was based on a pre-approved Interview Guide (Appendix F). Questions were arranged to engage the participant in conversation, then key questions were asked, using a series of probe questions as required. The questions used in the interviews were positioned to prime the editors to elaborate on their habits, preferences, and practices for filtering and shaping stories based on narrative. The interviewer referenced an example of an article using narrative from each publication during the interview.

Questions were not always asked in the same order for each interview, but instead dictated by the flow of conversation in each interview. Such flexibility allowed for the interviewer to keep the flow of the conversation moving in an enjoyable fashion. Lindlof and Taylor explain this as the importance of “serious play” where effective interviews revolve around a “tension between two demands” (2011, p. 186). These demands are loosely defined as the research objectives on one side, and the interviewee’s enjoyment on the other. The key to establishing “serious play” is “yielding some control over the interview,” so that the interviewee is encouraged to provide full, sincere answers without bounds (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 187).

### **Pretest**

A pretest was conducted by interviewing the editor of *Renewable Energy World*. The purpose of the pretest was to try out the questions and make any modifications needed to the structure of the interview. From the four optional questions at the end of the interview guide, the pre-test showed that two optional questions were naturally answered in the context of similar questions. In regards to the other two, one was included in every interview as a follow up

question to clarify use of narrative, and one was removed. The removed question dealt with comparing the specific characteristics of narrative, and was far too specific for the pre-test interviewee to give an honest answer in the context of her role as an editor.

### **Conducting the Interviews**

All interviews were conducted over the phone and recorded by the researcher using third-party software. TapeaCall is a downloadable app for iPhones that records phone conversations and was used for every interview with no problems.

Depending on the agreed-upon time for conducting the interview, the interviewer called the interviewee on the given phone number at appointed time. Following the approved script (Appendix E), the researcher reminded the participant about details of the study, confirmed that he or she read and approved of the confirmation email describing the study and the participants' rights, and agreed for the conversation to be recorded. The participant also was asked if he or she has any questions.

The interview was then conducted following the approved Interview Guide (Appendix F). At the conclusion of each interview, the researcher thanked the participant and confirmed that it would be acceptable to recontact him or her to clarify any statements made in the interview, and that a summary of the findings would be sent once finalized. A member check was conducted with one participant, the only one who requested one. The submitted material was reviewed and approved with a few minor changes. The researcher conducted interviews until sufficient data was retrieved and the researcher concluded additional interviews might not accrue significantly different insights.

## **Data Transcription and Analysis**

The results of this study are exploratory and intended to lay the groundwork for future studies, and are not meant to be generalizable since they reflect a limited sample and are qualitative in nature. One of the reasons Creswell and Poth (2016) give for conducting qualitative research is “a problem or issue needs to be explored, and a complex, detailed understanding of the issue is needed.” Creswell and Poth further describe the intent of qualitative research as “not to generalize the information but to elucidate the particular, the specific” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007).

To ensure validity, this study followed Taylor and Lindlof’s guidelines for qualitative data analysis and interpretation (2011, p. 241). The researcher sought permission of participants to recontact them for clarifications or further questions. After the interviews were conducted, each interview was transcribed and organized together with “in-process writings” (i.e., asides, and in-process memos) in order to actively reflect on the state of the research. These “in-process writings” were assisted with data management in order to “[gain] some control over data that tend to grow rapidly” (p. 243).

After data capture was complete for each transcription, the interview data was then “prioritized according to emerging schemes of interpretation” (p. 243). Principles of grounded theory (also known as the constant comparative technique; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) were adapted to the open-coding of responses. Wimmer and Dominick (2014) summarize the constant comparative technique in four steps: “comparatively assigning incidents to categories, elaborating and refining categories, searching for relationships and themes among categories, and simplifying and integrating data into a coherent theoretical structure” (p. 123). Creswell and Poth (2016) describe participants in a grounded theory study as having all experienced the

process in question in order to “help explain practice or provide a framework for further research” (p. 151).

Grounded theory develops and updates categories through “an ongoing process of comparing units of data with each other... with new data altering the scope and terms of the analytic framework” (Taylor & Lindlof, 2011, p. 250-251). This process continues over time until most of the incidents are coded and compared and each category is defined with greater precision (p. 251). The use of grounded theory to the fullest extent was limited by the small size (n=10) and homogeneous nature of the sample. Categories were then focused through the lens of the four research questions previously mentioned.

At the conclusion of the study, the researcher provided all original working materials and files to the Department of Journalism and Media Communication for safe keeping under federal records retention rules.



## CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

The 10 in-depth interviews provided insight into all four research questions. Responses from the ten participants also helped the researcher form a model to represent the complexity of the article generation process for trade media editors, and is presented in the Discussion section. An expanded review of participants' comments is included in Appendix H. A table representing the narrative reference articles and the participants' comments about them is presented in Appendix G.

### **Research Question 1: Article Development**

*RQ1, How do trade editors go about developing and selecting a good article? In particular, do they rely on their own subjective perception to gauge the impact, ideas of audience reactions, insights from market research, or something else?*

As described by participants, the selection and development stages of the article generation process were highly influenced by the input and output stages. While selection is the main focus of this research, chapter five describes the input and output stages in detail, and presents the stages of the article generation process as a model to support future studies on gatekeeping within trade media.

#### **Selection**

Several filters were mentioned for evaluating submitted content for publishing. All of the participants said they prefer content to be useful and relevant, and the majority said they prefer it be exclusive as well. Several also mentioned the importance of publishing positive, solution-based advocacy journalism, and avoiding any negativity towards individual companies, especially clients who regularly submit content. John Howell of *Just Means* said, “you can

bottom line us and say we focus on positive news, progress, solutions; and that's another filter on top of service to current clients and/or perspective clients." Other participants said they place importance on content that knows the publication's audience, and avoiding content from PR firms and companies that seem overtly sales oriented or self-aggrandizing.

Beyond these filters, the majority of the participants in this study said they rely on their subjective perception, personal reaction, or gut feeling, as the predominant method for selecting articles and topics for publishing. Subjective perception can be described as a feeling for what's newsworthy that's developed over time by staying immersed within the industry. While subjective perception was the most popular method described for making publication selections, several participants said it was influenced by market research and ideas of how the audience will react as well. Jennifer Runyon of *Renewable Energy World* listed timeliness and relevancy as preceding factors for an article to be considered, but called her selection decision "a gut feeling, and that's kind of the best way to describe it. If I read something and it grabs me, then I feel like it's going to work, and I go with it," she said. John Howell of *Just Means* also described his subjective perception as his editorial "instincts, but they're honed, they're informed, they're resting on something."

A wide variety of methods for conducting market research were described that revealed various approaches to using data and gauging industry interests. Several participants spoke of watching their own website metrics, using tools such as Google Analytics, to inform decisions of what topics to focus on and articles to publish. These metrics included the online traffic statistics to various channels of their publication's website, as well as the specific topics receiving the most clicks and views. In regards to her gut reaction combined with market research, Julia Pyper of *Greentech Media* said, "You know you just kind of know. It's very closely tied to number 2 of

knowing your audience, and looking at comments, looking at traffic, having it inform what you do going forward. Certainly anything new that involves someone notable, and we just kind of get that journalism tingly sense, and you follow that.”

The level to which each participant said they rely on market research to inform their decisions varied. Several participants mentioned that they receive support from an internal research team or an external research partner. John Parnell of *PV-Tech* said their publisher has a market research division that *PV-Tech* will crosslink blogs with, and Julia Pyper of *Greentech Media* said they have a “complementary” internal research team that informs what they do while remaining independent. Carly Rixham also mentioned *Solar Today* has a partnership with the National Renewable Energy Lab for article sources and images.

Attending trade events, conducting reader surveys, and communicating with companies within the industry were also listed by many participants as necessary methods for developing a sense of the industry’s direction. David Brearley of *Solar Pro* described their approach to market research as more of an “on-the-roof-approach” that’s “a little more organic” and “unsophisticated” in comparison to some of their data-driven competitors.

It’s also important to note participants said they decide what type of article and what channel would be best for the article as part of the selection decision. As Jennifer Runyon of *Renewable Energy World* receives pitches for companies or new products, she said she considers what type of article would be best for that content: Editorial opinion if “they need to argue it,” straight news, or narrative if they, for example, “need to tell the story of this company’s demise or this solar trade case, or battery storage for homeowners.”

Approaching participants’ selection decisions from another direction, several participants also mentioned the need to update channels of their website with a variety of content on a regular

basis in order to stay competitive and attract readers. John Parnell of *PV-Tech* highlighted this aspect in particular and said, “So we have these 5 top stories we want to draw peoples attention to, and it’s important to us to keep them rotating and keep them moving... And sometimes if we see stories from other publications, we might then say well look we need something half-decent today. How can we move this story on and develop it into something fresh and a bit more original?”

## **Development**

Once topics and content have been selected for publication, the third phase of the article generation process involves actually developing the articles. While the majority of participants described often writing the articles themselves, all participants discussed working with other writers, internally as well as externally, to direct and shape content towards their vision for the article. Decisions regarding the length of the article, the writer best fit for the topic, and the appropriate style of voice to be used followed closely with the type of article the participants imagined as best for the pitch and the topic. When asked about style in regards to her communication process with external writers, Kathie Zipp of *Solar Power World* explained, “And so, it depends, a lot of times we work from like word count and stuff and specify that more than style. But I think that is an important piece, you know do we want it to be written in first person, is it a short blog, or do we want it to be more of a story.” Chris Crowell of *Solar Builder* asserted his decisions on how to shape the content stem from the topic itself and his feelings follow. “I just let the topic kind of guide me which direction makes sense,” Chris said.

Publishing a variety of content forms with varying lengths was mentioned by the majority of participants as something important to their publication, and several described their content in specific categories of length and style. David Brearley of *Solar Pro* explained that once a pitch is

received, the length of the article is determined by how they classify it. Quality assurance articles were said to be on “shorter topics” while feature articles were described as a “deep dive” on “pretty complex subject matter.”

Some participants cleanly divided up their content into categories, and each participant described their own basket of content options to choose from. John Howell of *Just Means* said there are three types of articles they publish: a 300-400 word “news release from a client about some news of the day” where his writers are “basically adapting a news release,” an 800 or more word article based on one or more news sources that are “not press releases,” and a third article type, a “passionate interests” blog, where “somebody is a little more journalistic, a little more storytelling, and a little more personal.”

Lengths of feature articles in particular varied greatly per participant. While John Howell of *Just Means* said anything over a thousand words was a feature article, David Brearley of *Solar Pro* said their features fall in the 4000 to 5000 word range. Trevor Galbraith of *Global Solar and Alternative Energies* said they “plan not to limit” their articles at all since their readers want “to know the whole nine yards” when they come across an article in their “wheelhouse.” “Most magazines will limit their articles to 1500 words—we don’t,” Trevor explained.

While some participants described receiving a great deal of article pitches, others said their article generation process is more solicited. Five participants discussed using an outline with the writers for directing style, length, and specific questions to be answered for the article to be useful to their readers. Anne Fischer of *Solar Novus Today* described her development process decisions as “driven by the type of article that it is. ...Most of our articles are solicited, so we would discuss in advance what approach to take, and I often ask, you know, especially if

it's a freelance writer, I'll ask for a brief outline before they get going so we would discuss it and decide on what the best style would be for communicating that information."

The majority of participants discussed choosing the best writer for the topic, and several participants also mentioned the voice of the writer as something they directly consider for shaping and positioning content appropriately. Jennifer Runyon of *Renewable Energy World* attributed a high level of importance to preserving the writer's unique voice because she sees her publication as "the voice of the industry" and "the industry is diverse and it's got a lot of voice so I want all those voices to be out there." Although other publications may opt for uniformity across their articles, Jennifer said she doesn't "want every story to sound like exactly like the same person could have written it all."

In their development process, participants also listed many kinds of direct revisions they perform on the content. These edits were described as part of a back-and-forth communication process with the writer that's influenced by the editor's vision for the article and channel of publication. Direct edits mentioned by participants include shortening the word count, revising the headlines and transitions, adding in SEO elements, selecting attractive images, and restructuring whole sections of the content. John Howell of *Just Means* said once he receives a finished article from a writer, he tries to "tag it, flag it, keyword it, present the data in a clear, simple format so that you can get to this information." Direct edits such as these were aimed at improving reader comprehension as well as the number of views an article receives.

## **Research Question 2: Article Conceptualization**

*RQ2, What do editors understand about the value and role of narrative and storytelling? In particular, what is the relation between an article's importance versus its interestingness?*

## Value and Role

In discussing the use of narrative and storytelling, the majority of the participants asserted that narrative has a limited application within business-to-business journalism. Carly Rixham of *Solar Today* expressed concern over using the term “storytelling” in the context of a “fact-based news” publication, since it “might give the impression there might be some fiction involved.” “While narrative is enjoyable and entertaining, for our editorial style, we can be turned off too much drama, and so it has to be in the appropriate type of style and delivery so that it’s not overdramatized,” Carly said. John Howell of *Just Means* described his publication as “very information driven” and asserted, “information can be a real threat to narrative.” Anne Fischer of *Solar Novus Today* mentioned that although the narrative form is “probably of greater interest” to readers, her publication is “pretty technical, so we don’t often write in narrative style.”

While the majority of participants described the application of narrative and storytelling as limited within their publication, the majority also said narratives were more valuable than other article forms. David Brearley of *Solar Pro* asserted that narratives are more valuable than other forms, and went on to explain, “It’s sort of implicit in everything we’re doing, and we’ve done a bunch of articles that are exploring content. We really just want to be generating content that’s useful and valuable, and often more narrative driven.” When participants were asked to elaborate on why they thought narratives were more valuable, several explanations emerged.

Five of the participants mentioned that narratives are more rare than other article forms, and being more rare implied benefits to the publication as well as the reader. Commenting on why narrative is more rare, Carly Rixham of *Solar Today* said “because we have our regular contributors who contribute articles which are not necessarily narratives but more argument style, so we kind of that covered, and so our feature articles we kind of look to as more narrative.”

Several participants discussed the rareness of narrative as a benefit for ensuring content was exclusive and protected from being copied by other publications. “It’s not just the fact it’s a narrative,” John Parnell of *PV-Tech* said, “it’s the fact that it’s exclusive and other sources of news immediately disown any possible chance of exclusivity.”

Longer form, in-depth narratives were also said by several participants to have a longer shelf life and to help earn the trust of readers. “Obviously it holds more value if it’s in a narrative form,” Trevor Galbraith of *Global Solar and Alternative Energies* said. John Parnell of *PV-Tech* elaborated on earning readers’ trust by referencing the narrative reference example and saying, “you don’t win that trust from copying press releases or from always making sure you’re the first person to cover company results, or having the best analysis and so on. The stuff that wins that trust in the first place is the longer form, stuff like this Africa story.”

Five of the participants also discussed the need to provide content in a variety of forms, and while the level of described use varied per publication, narrative was said to be a piece of each publication’s overall offerings. Anne Fischer of *Solar Novus Today* mentioned that she thinks “narrative breaks up some of the more technical stuff, and to be able to give the reader a variety of styles in the same publication makes it a lot more approachable.” Kathie Zipp of *Solar Power World* emphasized variety as well, asserting the reader is encouraged to find something that interests them and fits their preference for content. “I think it all goes back to providing different types of stories, different lengths, different tones, different approaches, to engage the reader,” Kathie asserted.

The majority of participants said they thought narrative can be more engaging than other article forms, but each participant clarified that engagement also depends on other factors relative to the reader. Factors listed for engagement included the article medium as well as the reader’s



preferences, mood, setting, and expectations. Jennifer Runyon said she thought of a narrative as “definitely” more engaging, “with the caveat that I have limited time and sometimes just need to know what the news is,” she said. Jennifer explained that in her mind, “a narrative is longer,” even though “that’s not necessarily true.”

Chris Crowell of *Solar Builder* also said narrative “draws the reader in a little bit more,” but broadened the factors for engagement to include a combination of the medium and the subject. He described his own experience as an example of narrative engagement changing by how the article is positioned within a publication, and explained how his expectations come into play. Chris said, “sometimes they’re engaging, sometimes I’m just put off by it. So it can be subject and medium specific for me.” Carly Rixham of *Solar Today* and Julia Pyper of *Greentech Media* listed factors for engagement that focus on personal preference for article form as well as expectations from a publication. Carly attributed engagement to reader “preference” and “mood”, and similarly, Julia described personal preference as well. “It depends on what state of mind your reader has when they come to your site, and they come to different sites for different things,” Julia Pyper said.

John Parnell of *PV-Tech* referenced his website analytics as a measure for the varied engagement they experience. In regards to narrative being more engaging than other article forms, John said, “I think it varies, and I say that not as cop out but because that’s what we see from our analytics.” Chris Crowell of *Solar Builder* also said he wasn’t sure if narratives were more valuable than other article forms, but explained, “there’s just not as much value in doing an inverted pyramid style story I think for the topics I’m trying to dive into.” In terms of narrative, Chris said that he’s “always kind of liked that style, cause I think it just draws the reader in a

little bit more, and narrative is something I use quite often, or I just try to be as personable as possible.”

In comparison to straight news stories, several participants mentioned the ability for readers to learn through storytelling as part of the value of narrative. Jennifer Runyon of *Renewable Energy World* explained “a straight news story is great for facts but it doesn’t always tell the whole story, all the contacts, and at least with something like energy there’s always a bigger story because it’s an industry you know that’s affected by policy in addition to technology, so it’s all the pieces.” Kathie Zipp of *Solar Power World* made a similar remark by saying she thinks “having different flow and maybe a longer article can help the reader understand a little bit more, rather than just displaying the facts.”

### **Importance vs interestingness**

All of the participants stated article importance is the priority over article interestingness, and the majority said it was something they definitely think about. Interestingness and importance were described as complementary, not mutually exclusive, and while each participant mentioned several ways an article can be made more interesting, a few participants placed some of the responsibility on the writer as well. “I think that a good writer can really balance both,” Kathie Zipp said.

While balancing an article’s importance with interestingness was mentioned by all participants in some fashion, several participants cautioned against publishing content that is overly focused on being creative as it may get in the way of an article’s utility. Participants asserted that because readers ultimately approach their publication for useful information that can help them in their jobs, respecting the reader’s time is vital for maintaining the perceived value of their publication.

Elaborating on respecting the reader's time, several participants made a clear distinction between content with entertainment as a goal, and content that's interesting. For trade publication readers, being entertained is not an expectation. "I think the importance of the information is more important because for a trade publication, they're reading it because that's what they do for a living," Anne Fischer of *Solar Novus Today* explained. "So it is important for things to be interesting, but you know not entertaining."

### **Research Question 3: Importance of Message Characteristics**

*RQ3, What types of information lends itself to narrative form? When is the use of narrative elements appropriate for news articles?*

#### **Types of Information**

In regard to the types of information that participants said work well in a narrative format, a few general categories of information emerged across the participants' answers. The majority of participants referenced information related to new markets, new applications, and innovation as categories for content that's commonly shaped into a narrative form. Narrative was described as a tool that gives context to this new information and allows the reader to relate to their peers in a practical way. Some of the labels presented for these types of stories were problem and solution stories, success stories, project case studies, company profiles, and new market features.

Chris Crowell of *Solar Builder* described his thought process behind structuring an innovation story as an internal conversation with himself. He said, "So I always I think try to follow up and tell any sort of innovation story in a narrative way cause I want to relate it to that day-to-day job, you know, what is it making simpler? What part of the process? Is it just the beginning part? Is it at the end of this, it generated more electricity. If it did, why did it?" Chris further asserted that narrative "can be the better way of relaying technical content," and

referenced an example of receiving positive feedback from a client company for writing their technical design process in a narrative format that they thought made the technical content “sound interesting.” Anne Fischer of *Solar Novus Today* explained that her readers “love” narrative case studies because they are “interested in different uses of solar,” “even if they don’t make that kind of solar or are not going to buy that or install that.”

Several participants said they think narratives worked well for giving context to processes in particular. Information regarding processes was mentioned by Kathie Zipp of *Solar Power World*, but for a different reason than Chris Crowell. Kathie described framing new processes over time with narrative as a way for readers to learn effectively, and did not think information detailing a new technology would work as well. “So if there’s something that I think there’s a little beginning, middle, and end to, like maybe over time, that makes a good narrative rather than just like this is how this battery works,” Kathie Zipp said. She went on to explain that they include a project case study in every issue, and that readers enjoy being able to “walk” through the process as a story. “I think people really like those real-life examples and they kind of want to learn the story through the process. They want to learn through the process, because especially with a solar installation or project, there is a beginning, middle, and end, so I think it’s beneficial to walk the reader through that process so they can learn from mistakes or different challenges that those people experienced in the beginning, middle, or the end.”

Several participants described using narrative as a tool for presenting marketing material and repositioning paid client news. David Brearley of *Solar Pro* explained that they don’t publish advertorial content. Instead they encourage advertisers to submit content as a Project Profile. David explained, “even when you’re just looking at content as a way of marketing vehicles, the best marketing vehicles is the stuff that doesn’t look like marketing material, you know?” Chris

Crowell of *Solar Builder* also asserted that although “content marketing is really big right now,” marketing material “can still be objective and [written] in a way that is interesting and draws people in, and I think that ends up working better than writing it in a more aggressive argumentative style.”

People, as opposed to process, was also mentioned by several participants as a category of information that’s effective for use with narrative. Kathie Zipp of *Solar Power World* also included information for company profiles as being effective for narrative since the company’s history can be plotted over time to “tell the story where the company came from and how they got to where they are. I think that maybe appeals to the human side of the reader,” Kathie said.

### **Appropriateness**

While case studies, project profiles, and feature stories were the most common article forms mentioned by participants as being appropriate for narratives, several other factors were mentioned by participants that described when narrative elements are appropriate for news articles. Most of the participants expressed that the article format needs to match the subject matter and be supported with objective data. Several participants specifically mentioned using multiple sources in order to keep bias in check and balance viewpoints. Kathie Zipp of *Solar Power World* summarized this notion by saying, “we try to do two sources at least on each story because then in your story you’re getting a couple different opinions, and a couple different backgrounds.” Kathie went on to say that she thought “a good article has at least a couple sources, and it’s cool, so sources are not in the same maybe geographic area or exactly the same part of the industry so you’re getting a couple different perspectives.”

The majority of participants said they thought of narratives as longer articles best received when the reader isn’t limited on time, but as discussed in the Development phase of

RQ1, the length of articles and use of narrative varied per publication. A few participants discussed the challenges of keeping narrative articles short enough for their website. Coming from an online-only publication (*Greentech Media*), Julia Pyper suggested that narrative could be more effective in a shorter article form than a longer one. “If you can keep your narrative concise and short, it could potentially be consumed more or be more effective,” she said. Jennifer Runyon of *Renewable Energy World* stated that her online-only publication tries to publish a feature article everyday in a mix of various content since they “have some readers that you know only like the feature stories and only reader our longer narrative longer form stuff, but others really just want the headlines, just want the news.” In relation to narrative being published online, several participants expressed the importance of separating narrative from quick-hitting news. If the reader is expecting a quick news item and they find a narrative instead, this can annoy the reader and hurt the publication’s perceived value. “People kind of know they’re bracing themselves for a different kind of a read, because if you tell a narrative story among the other quick hits, I think people get caught off guard and their responses aren’t as good,” Chris Crowell of *Solar Builder* said.

Several participants, especially participants publishing in print, expressed that narrative can be more appropriate in print than online. This notion was associated with the reader’s mindset and expectations for picking up a magazine versus visiting a website. According to Chris Crowell of *Solar Builder*, the use of narrative “makes sense” to him in print, because readers like himself are more likely to sit down and invest “for the long haul a little bit more.” Carly Rixham expressed a similar sentiment for using narrative in print since *Solar Today* takes “more of a coffee-table magazine that is inspiring to people,” so “the narrative approach is important to include.”

#### Research Question 4: Preferences and Perceptions

*RQ4: When dealing with persuasive content, do trade editors prefer narrative to argumentative style? In particular, what are their perceptions about narrative in relation to argumentative style?*

The majority of the participants said they think the use of narrative versus non-narrative article forms affects the readers' reception of the underlying ideas. Jennifer Runyon of *Renewable Energy World* asserted, "I think the way you present an argument is very... it matters how the person is going to receive it." David Brearley of *Solar Pro* expanded on this notion by discussing his readers as a community in an industry without clear-cut answers in which the interpretation of data matters. David said, "It's a community, and I think the narrative structure is a little bit more, not top-down, and also a lot of these topics are not cut and dry, particularly codes and standards and installation practices, there's a lot of interpretation that goes into things."

Participants listed various factors that can affect the reader's reception to the article form, such as the reader's mood, interests, article topic, and the article medium. Carly Rixham of *Solar Today* explained the appeal of narrative as a tool for persuasion and said, "it's possible that if it's a narrative, the reader might be more relaxed, and open, and receptive. However, it just depends on what the interests of the reader are. If they're more scientific and they want specifics and you know, more of a, you know, a non-fiction type approach, they can be turned off by it. So it really depends on the mood of the reader and the interests of the reader." Julia Pyper of *Greentech Media* also asserted that the article form "definitely can [affect the reader's reception], depending on the issue" being presented. She went on to explain the importance of grounding narrative with useful facts and information. "You can have a meandering narrative that people don't have any

concrete takeaways [from], like well, that was an interesting story,” Julia said. Jennifer Runyon of *Renewable Energy World* asserted that storytelling was fundamental to the way “most people” try to persuade. “If you’re making a point, you’ve gotta engage the reader. You’ve gotta make them apply [it] to their own life, or something that they know, and you know, storytelling is the way to do that. From when people are children, you’re telling stories and that’s what engages you.”

Chris Crowell of *Solar Builder* stated that he has to deal regularly with persuasive content submitted by companies that “maybe have an agenda” in which the content “benefits their message more than it does conveying what I want the basic idea to be about.” Chris went on to explain that narrative can be more persuasive than argumentative style, “cause it can feel maybe less like there’s an agenda behind it, there’s maybe a little more thought relaying it, or you know its just a little bit less of a in-your-face concept.” He also asserted that with narratives, “maybe, hopefully, the reader reads it and maybe, is led to draw their own conclusions a little bit more just by the flow of how you’ve chosen to present the information.”

John Parnell of *PV-Tech* expressed a similar sentiment towards avoiding the argumentative form with persuasive content, and said “it tends to make people reactionary” and “people are going to respond to poorly to that. With the various trade cases I should say, there have been various instances where one side or another has come out swinging, and the response is usually that we get some unpublishable comments in the wake of it. People don’t tend to take to it well. It tends to make people reactionary. So I would say that narrative probably offers a better chance to change people’s minds purely because they don’t feel like their opinions are under attack.” He also referenced a study he had seen recently “that found if you present people



of a certain opinion with specific hard, scientific facts and raw data that contradicts their opinion, they tend to become more entrenched; not less, in their initial opinion.”

The majority of participants said narrative can be more persuasive than the argumentative style, but also clarified that persuasion depends on factors other than just article form. Kathie Zipp of *Solar Power World*, for instance, attributed some of the persuasive power of articles to the number of sources used. “It depends on if the narrative has one source or a couple or it’s just the writer’s opinion, yeah they could be persuasive,” Kathie said.

The majority of participants said they think the article form affects the reader’s reception and that narratives can be more persuasive than argumentative style if executed well, but only a few expressed they preferred narrative over the argumentative style for persuasive content. John Parnell of *PV-Tech* thought narrative can be more persuasive than argumentative, but also doubts there’s a significant possibility for the reader to change their mind. John was the only participant to express this point of view explicitly. “The number of people who are reading any form of media with the view to see if they can change their minds about something is probably fairly low,” John said.

Another way participants compared argumentative with narrative was by the amount of work required to create content for each form, and the amount of engagement expected. Narrative articles were viewed by the majority of participants as longer than argumentative articles, and therefore, several participants expressed that narrative requires more work to write and edit. This aspect is important for understanding how trade editors view narrative, because even though they may think narrative is more persuasive, and more engaging, they don’t necessarily prefer it. John Parnell of *PV-Tech* expressed this viewpoint the most poignantly. “In particular, with blogs whether they’re guest blogs or internal blogs, it can be very hard to predict

what is going to draw traffic and social media attention and underlying comments,” John said. “I think what we probably find is although volume wise we’re writing a lot more news, if you looked at the average success of a story, so thinking about not just hits but also engagement, longevity, and all those kinds of things, the blogs definitely win, but in terms of the amount of time that are put into them, the sort of... the reward versus effort wise, it’s hard to compare, but I would say that it’s a lot easier to do volume news and get the same level of engagement as you would from sitting down and putting that time into writing a really good blog just because it can be so hard to predict what kind of reception it will get.”

## CHAPTER 5 – DISCUSSION

### **Summary of Findings**

The purpose of this study was to explore how participants generate articles, how they view and value narrative as an article form, and to what extent narrative affects their publishing decisions as gatekeepers. The findings suggest an article development process in which the decisions in the Selection stage were influenced by non-linear decisions made in conjunction with the Input (sources and submissions for topics, pitches, and full articles), Development, and Output stages.

The selection stage was the primary concern of this research. While articles can be written, solicited, or submitted, the findings showed that the subjective perception of participants, or their “gut feeling,” was the most common method attributed to for evaluating topics and content to be published. Market research and ideas of how the audience will react were commonly said to influence participants’ gut feeling as they develop a sense for what’s newsworthy in the industry over time. Participants focused on generating useful and relevant content for their diverse audience of industry professionals, and several mentioned a filter for exclusively publishing positive, solution-based content to avoid damaging reputations of companies within their industry, especially companies that may be submitting content.

When asked about crosslinking articles or blogs, several participants discussed the importance of paid client news, or content marketing, as a regular source of content for their publication that may be rewritten and/or separated as advertising content. Of the seven participants that published in print as well as online, content was shaped and separated by medium, with digital content needing to be shorter in order to appease the online audience.

Articles in print were generally described as being more in-depth than website content. Since the audience is picking up the printed magazine to read it, participants viewed the audience as being self-selected for that medium, and therefore are more willing to be told a longer story in narrative form. Some participants eventually will release the printed magazine online in a digital form, ensuring exclusivity of printed content for up to six months for their magazine subscribers.

While narrative was viewed as having a limited application within B2B media and participants were cautious to publish anything overly dramatic; narrative had a role to play in each publication's offerings. The majority of participants thought of narrative as more rare and more valuable than other forms, and several participants spoke of the role narrative can have in earning trust from readers. Several participants spoke of the length of narratives being longer as a benefit to the reader by allowing more details, more sources, and more interpretation in order to help the reader understand the bigger picture of a topic.

Providing content in a variety of forms and styles was important to the majority of participants as they viewed their audience as having a range of preferences and moods that each form may cater to. Every participant prioritized importance over interestingness and cautioned against content purposed as entertainment, yet interestingness and importance were said to ideally coincide for the strongest content.

Participants described many of the same categories for information commonly used in the narrative format. Narrative was viewed as a vehicle for assimilating readers with new information, practices, technology, and marketing material. Using multiple sources and perspectives while remaining unbiased was a consistent concern, especially among persuasive content submitted by companies within the industry. Participants were cautious against saying narratives are more persuasive, and while participants thought of narratives as more engaging,

they don't necessarily prefer them because they can require more work without the guarantee of greater online engagement versus argumentative, volume news.

### **Limited Conceptualization of Narrative**

When participants were asked about what types of information are commonly shaped into narratives, and then probed for details regarding narrative elements, responses were general. References to specific narrative characteristics were limited, and participants were reluctant to describe their selection process in detail. When asked if there were certain kinds of content that are commonly flagged for use with the narrative structure, Jennifer Runyon of *Renewable Energy World* replied, "I mean, generally, but I don't think about it the way we're talking about it now. I may get something in and say will you please write this as an op-ed, or I get something in and I say, you know, send it to a freelancer and say you know I need an article about this." Probed to elaborate on which aspects of narrative were thought to be more persuasive than others, Jennifer replied that although it was a good question, she wasn't sure she had "a good answer."

When taken in conjunction with subjective perception as the dominant method of selection, a limited conceptualization for article types reflects Gans' description of the story selection process as "hurried" and based on "feel" with "quick, virtually intuitive judgments" so that "choice can be made without too much deliberation" (1979, p.82). If editors were to conceptualize details of article forms in the midst of making selection decisions, their process could be slowed down, and as stated by many participants in regards to their intense workload—time is limited.

Furthermore, participants' limited conceptualization of narrative during the selection process supports gatekeeping literature stating that when editors first hear of an event that could

be published, the strongest predictor of the event's newsworthiness is the nature of the event (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). In other words, editors are more focused on using their subjective perception to gauge how interesting and important the event is in the context of their industry, before it is shaped into any specific article form.

When asked about her preferences for style versus structure, Kathie Zipp of *Solar Power World* replied, "it depends—a lot of times we work from like word count and stuff and specify that more than style. But I think that is an important piece, you know, do we want it to be written in first person, is it a short blog, or do we want it to be more of a story.... Most of the articles we write aren't in first person or have our personal opinion." While literature on gatekeeping has stated that "the use of first- and second-person voice in news stories increases the odds that a news item will appear more relevant to the reader" (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009, p. 190), little research has been conducted on the voice of news stories in trade media specifically. Participants did not seem to prefer first-person stories over third-person stories, and several mentioned the importance of providing several views in order to remain unbiased and show a bigger picture. In a study around health news (a type of specialized consumer magazine), journalists were found to use first-person stories and exemplars with "base-rate information, such as statistics and a checklist" (Hinnant et. al., 2013, p. 539). Exemplars are a type of narrative that focus on a specific individual's story in order to illustrate an experience, and the implications for choosing one exemplar versus another could be studied in relation to trade media as well.

Conceptualizing the length of an article before the style reflects literature on gatekeeping in which gatekeepers shape content based on their preference for display, timing, and writing style (Shoemaker, 1991) after deciding if the event itself is newsworthy for their audience. Shoemaker and Vos list the gates in the media channel as "selection decisions, assessments of

how important various piece of information are, shaping of the news items, deciding how long the coverage will be, the graphic presentation, and the position within the news medium” (p. 186, 2009). The way participants described their gatekeeping process supports Shoemaker and Vos’ list of gates, but it should be noted that the word count is closely associated with the importance of news items, the article form, and the medium the article will be published in.

### **Varying Definition and Level of Use for Narrative**

While the majority of participants described narrative as an important part of their overall content offerings and viewed narrative as more valuable than other article forms, the level of use and definition for narrative varied. All of the participants of online only publications described the need to keep their articles short for the online audience, while articles in print were said to allow for more depth as the reader self-selects the medium and is potentially willing to take more time with an article.

In terms of what defines a narrative, Julia Pyper of *Greentech Media* (online only) did not think the article chosen by the researcher as a narrative reference example from her publication was a good example of a narrative. “The lead and everything is pretty much this is the most current news, and then he breaks it down so I don’t think it’s a super narrative story,” Julia said. As one of the few participants who thought narrative wasn’t “necessarily” more valuable, she explained that she thinks of narrative as being personal. “Yeah I mean the official definition says there’s more of a personal element involved and that’s kind of what I think of a narrative storytelling too. That’s kind of a hard to always have it apply in the space that we cover,” Julia said. To show an example of something she published that was more narrative-driven, she instead referenced an article where the author told more of a personal story that gave him credibility on the subject. She further attributed the limited use of narrative to a limited attention

span for the online audience, stating that narrative could “potentially” be more persuasive, but that it’s difficult to say. “Are they more persuasive? Potentially. I think I’m just so colored by the fact that it’s hard to get people to read things these days,” Julia said.

Many other participants shared this sentiment towards their online audience in particular, and several referenced *The New Yorker* specifically as a publication where readers can expect longer narratives. This notion supports literature on gatekeeping stating that, “Knowledge of readers’ needs and wants is a prerequisite to reader satisfaction, which in turn sustains the readers’ desire to receive a magazine” (Dodds, 1969, p. 33). Participants described narratives as more rare than other forms partly because they need to be cautious of using narrative too much in business-to-business media where they must primarily cater to their audience with useful information before considering style. As stated by Shoemaker and Vos, “narrative structures, such as news stories, can be misapplied to describe experiences” (2009), and editors want to avoid disappointing readers by misusing a narrative when a narrative is not needed.

### **Narrative More Valuable but not Necessarily Preferred**

As previously discussed, the majority of participants thought narrative was more valuable, more rare, and more exclusive, with several stating that narratives provide a much needed variety to their offerings. Providing a variety of content was a key issue for participants, and narrative was said to play an important part in catering to a wide range of reader preferences. This supports literature on the editor’s role in trade media specifically, as trade media editors “must provide a good editorial mix” by selecting from a “wide of sources: items of news, features, specialized stories, off-beat pieces, illustrations and so on” (Hart, 1971, p. 81). Participants’ regard for narrative as a tool for providing variety reveals the bigger picture of



reader preferences trade media editors must cater to in order for their publication to build loyalty and grow.

Several participants also mentioned narrative as having a longer shelf life, and by providing more details through a longer, in-depth article, narrative was said to help foster loyalty and trust of readers. Literature on trade media explains the importance of reader loyalty for trade media as a major preceding factor for receiving payments from advertisers to sustain their publication. Daubert elaborated on this, stating, "...readers are not naturally loyal to a publication. Their loyalty must be earned. The publication must run material the readers find interesting and useful. Otherwise, readers and potential readers will not subscribe to a publication or buy it at a newsstand" (1961, p. 52).

The idea that narratives are appreciated and preferred by readers is supported in literature on narrative theory and gatekeeping, stating that, "Although one or two of the usual newsworthiness criteria are important to readers, Shoemaker, Seo and Johnson (2008) also show that readers prefer news writing practices that draw the reader into the story – something that journalism students learn and that apparently readers appreciate." However, participants were also careful to avoid sweeping generalizations in favor of narrative, consistently bringing up factors that influence the reader's experience, such as medium, topic, mood, preference, and how well the article form works with these factors. This realistic yet complex view of reader appreciation for narratives in trade media highlights a key difference between trade media and general news media: general news can afford to entertain while trade media must always help the reader with something important and useful. Furthermore, all participants placed the importance of content over interestingness for trade media, and many warned against overdramatic narratives that could be seen as mere entertainment. Participants explained they always want to

publish content that is important and interesting, but the reality for trade media is sometimes, the reader just needs to hear the facts.

Participants widely acknowledged the effects narrative can have on an audience, such as improved comprehension, memory retention, and learning, and largely agreed with literature on narrative theory and narrative persuasion. In particular, participants described narrative as effective for interpreting new markets, applications, and innovations as types of content. This supports literature on narrative persuasion stating that narratives “are vehicles for making new information recognizable... linking the unknown to the known and permitting comparison” (Petraglia, 2007, p. 496). Narrative was preferred for use with this type of content, giving context to new ideas and markets, but not necessarily preferred for all news stories.

Narrative was also described by several participants as an article form commonly used with paid client news. As stated previously, many participants expressed frustration towards the material submitted to them by PR firms and marketing departments, and several participants hoped this study would help inform PR firms of what editors in trade media are really looking for. It should be noted that this frustration is not new, and dealing with this poorly crafted PR material has been documented by literature on trade media.

Daubert (1961) found the following:

People in industry, particularly marketeers who have a high opinion of their wares, often fail to understand the significance of the element of news. Since they are so close to their own products and companies, they feel that newsmen and editors cannot help but share their enthusiasm. But there is a distinction between dispensing news and dispensing information based solely on the feeling that one's products and company are better than others. (p. 10)

The best practices section will highlight some recommendations for PR firms and for trade media editors, but future research should focus on this interesting cross-point of gatekeeping in more detail. As a source of news in their respective industries, trade media editors have an obligation to their readers to address critical issues within the industry. Hallahan (2003), as mentioned previously, described trade media “as an external source of intelligence,” for channel members to use in their decision-making (p. 5). However, by having to act in the best interest of their publication in regards to securing income from paid clients, editors are put into an awkward predicament of divided loyalties because of their obligation to serve readers and the best interests of the industry as whole by providing objective news and analysis even if it might raise the ire of particular advertisers. More broadly, it could be argued trade editors are in a position to serve a greater role in society by contributing to the public discourse on industry-related matters that have broader societal consequences. As modern trade media publications continue to rely on paid client news, future studies could reveal how this affects decisions in the gatekeeping process for trade media editors.

### **Gatekeeping Selection Influenced by Other Stages of Article Generation Process**

While results describing the Selection and Development stages of gatekeeping are presented in chapter four, the Input and Output stages were found to influence these decisions as well. It’s important to note that participants expressed the order of steps for the article generation process as interchangeable on an article-to-article basis. The decisions made in the Selection phase are connected with sources of Input, decisions in the Development phase, and the channels and mediums of the Output phase. These decisions tend to overlap and were described as non-linear. This supports recent literature on gatekeeping that builds on Lewin’s original model for news selection, revising the interaction between gatekeeping channels as non-linear.

Shoemaker and Vos (2009) found that:

When we apply Lewin's model to news, we also see that the channels are not limited to two and that the exact nature of channels varies by type and location of event and by time and space. Thus the channels are not fixed or impenetrable, but instead are fluid, and information flows between them on its way to the audience. (p. 184)

In order to summarize the complexity of decision making for the article generation process, for trade media editors specifically, the researcher created the figure below. While many forms of the gatekeeping process have been presented and refined in research, trade media has been less examined, and requires the addition of paid client news as a channel that general news media does not have to consider when making selection decisions.

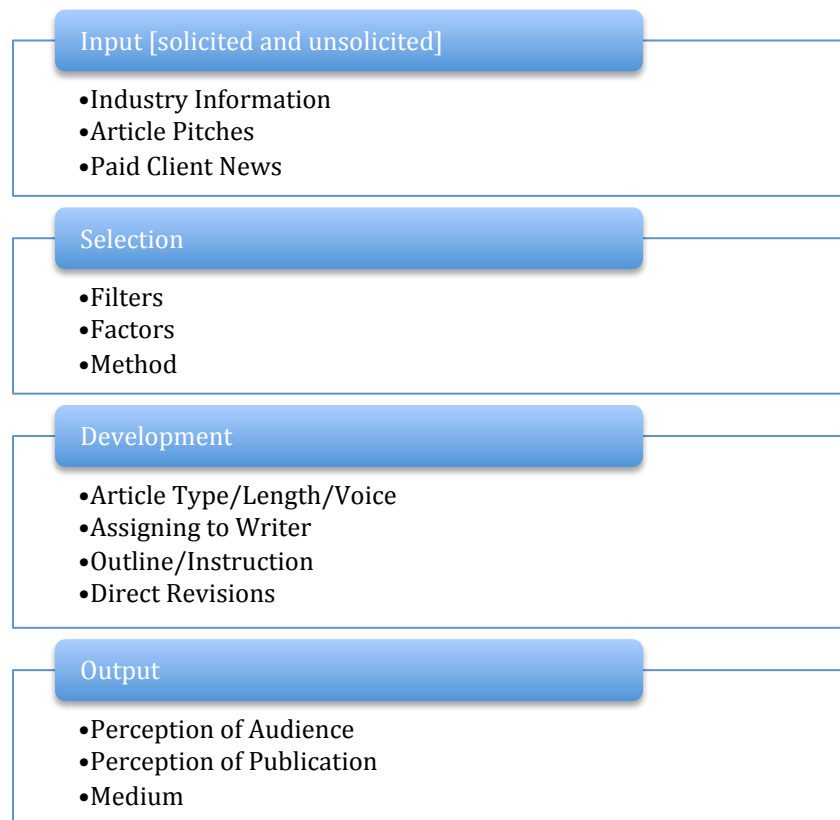


Figure 1. Article Generation Process for Trade Media Editors

## Input

As expressed by all participants, the role of the editor in the article development process is multifaceted. The editor must first develop a keen sense for the direction the industry is headed by listening to many sources and filtering through a vast amount of information in order to predict what topics will be important to readers. The majority of participants described the importance of building an editorial calendar a year or more in advance, and several described having a flexible editorial calendar to allow advertisers to plan ads accordingly while leaving room for emerging trends. David Brearley of *Solar Pro* asserted they plan 50% of their feature articles a year in advance, leaving room to “develop content in a more real-time basis.”

When asked about responsibilities as an editor and routes for article generation, every participant described filtering through a vast amount of information, solicited and unsolicited, in order to identify important key trends and topics for generating content. Participants listed many channels for gathering industry information, and many methods for saving, organizing, and qualifying emerging topics and trends. Channels for gathering industry information included word of mouth at trade events, newsletters from organizations within the industry, email chains, listservs, social media, competitor publications, press releases, general news, as well as contributed articles and article pitches from freelancers, PR firms, and companies within the renewable energy industry.

Every participant but one said they work in a team to gather information and generate content; Chris Crowell of *Solar Builder* was the only participant writing alone internally to generate content. The rest of the participants described a team effort for identifying trends that involved sharing an internal document for keeping track of topics and ideas in order to qualify patterns across submitted content as well as external industry news. John Howell of *Just Means*

mentioned they identify patterns across content that's been submitted to them by "hundreds of clients who pay us to put out their news, and their news has topics."

All of the participants said they publish a combination of content written externally and in-house, but the use of external freelancers and contributors varied greatly. Five of the 10 participants said they use freelancers, and several of these participants said they only use them for articles that will be in print. John Parnell of *PV-Tech* explained using freelancers for online articles is "not a very resource efficient way of dealing with news, but in print we definitely do use freelancers." Anne Fischer of *Solar Novus Today* did not make a distinction between using freelancers for online versus print articles, but did say, "we have people with different specialties, so if we know we have an article on something specific, I know pretty much who would be the best person to write it." In terms of contributors, Anne also explained that they use PR sources "basically as a contact to the company," and then "have a company's spokesperson write the article." "We try to get real experts in the field to write them rather than having a marketing-oriented piece," she said. All participants said they use contributors in some way and receive press releases and article pitches from companies, but the term contributor referred to several types of sources. Contributors were described as partners, clients, vendors, customers, and advertisers that share pitches, blogs, and full articles, but contributors were also described as contractors, columnists, industry experts, and industry analysts, meaning that contributors can represent third-party individuals as well as whole companies.

Several participants said they crosslink blogs from company websites or independent contributors. When asked about crosslinking, Kathie Zipp of *Solar Power World* said, "Obviously a lot of our, a lot more companies, whether they're manufacturers or distributors or contractors are starting to develop their own content." She went on to say that content marketing

is “a new marketing approach that a lot of companies are trying to pursue,” and that *Solar Power World* does accommodate some of these requests, “if it’s a good article and the company is not talking about themselves, and you know it could be something like a contributor’s blog which has been something that has been only shared on their website.”

Content marketing was explicitly described by several participants as a trend that’s become popular, and balancing advertising content with editorial content was mentioned by several participants as an important aspect of their responsibilities as editors. “We need good content, you know if we’re putting out 6 issues a year, we need good content all the time and to have opportunities to contribute all the time but we kind of have a firewall between the editorial and advertising content,” David Brearley said of *Solar Pro*. Instead of publishing advertising content, David Brearley said they encourage advertisers to become “opinion thought leaders” by telling them to submit “great technical content, leave the sales pitch at the door.”

## **Selection**

The Selection stage is presented in full in the Results section. To summarize, participants described publishing content that’s useful, relevant, and positive for their audience of renewable energy professionals, and ideally, exclusive to their publication. In order to select topics and articles for publication, the majority of participants said they rely on their subjective perception, personal reaction, instinct, or gut feeling, as the predominant method (over market research and ideas of how the audience will react) to discern what’s newsworthy. Several participants explained that this feeling was informed by market research and ideas of how the audience will react.

Methods for market research were described in several ways. Some participants hand in internal or external research team they partnered with, while others described a more first-hand

approach that included trade events, reader surveys, and direct communication with companies within the industry. Furthermore, some participants mentioned they decided the article type and channel to be published as part of the selection decision itself. Maintaining a variety of content was important to several participants, and therefore, the selection and timing of an article was influenced by the rest of the content on the medium and specific channels of that medium.

## **Development**

The Development stage is presented in full in the Results section. To summarize, decisions made in the Selection stage regarding article type and medium and channel influenced the length, the choice of writer, and the style of voice for the article. Once again, publishing a variety of content forms and lengths was mentioned by the majority of participants as something important to their readers and their publication. For feature articles in particular, the length described varied greatly per participant. Some participants labeled feature articles as over a thousand words, while others said 40000 to 5000, or even no limit.

It's important to note that the amount of article pitches each publication received varied greatly. Some described their article generation process as being more solicited with style, length, and specific questions included in the outline sent to the writer. The voice of the writer was mentioned by several participants as something they consider when soliciting for a specific article type and choosing the best writer for the topic. Lastly, direct revisions were commonly described as being a part of a back-and-forth process with the writer that included shortening for word count, adding SEO elements, coordinating images, and even restructuring whole sections.

## **Output**

Of the 10 participants interviewed, six were editors of publications in print and online, and four were editors of online-only publications. Four of the six publications in print published



magazines bimonthly, while *Solar Today* published quarterly published 10 magazines a year. Of the four online-only publications, *Renewable Energy World* was the only one that publishes digital content as a digital magazine as well as website content.

The four participants from online-only publications mentioned several advantages to moving away from publishing in print. These advantages included eliminating the use of paper to be more environmentally friendly, and increasing publishing speed since “you don’t have to wait three months to send things off to the printer,” Anne Fischer of *Solar Novus Today* said. Jennifer Runyon mentioned that since *Renewable Energy World* is “all about renewable and sustainability,” going digital only with their content made sense.

All four of the participants from online-only publications described the need to keep their articles short in order to appease their online readers. Three of these participants mentioned they’ve seen a decrease in readers’ attention spans as an online trend and described keeping readers’ attention as a challenge that’s part of their editorial responsibilities. Discussing his online content, John Howell of *Just Means* said, “I constantly feel pressured to keep things terse, and tight, and brief, because people even if they’re getting to our site, and skim all around, they’re picking within our site, they’re moving fast.” Speaking about her online reader data, Julia Pyper of *Greentech Media* described the challenge of keeping readers on a webpage. “It’s a big challenge of today’s news world, is figuring out how to keep people’s eyeballs on a website.” Jennifer Runyon echoed this sentiment by stating that “as a trend over the decade” she’s worked at *Renewable Energy World*, she’s lucky to get “three minutes on a page” from a reader, and as a result, they have lowered the word count of articles from between 1500 to 2000, to now have a max of 1200 words.

For editors of publications in print as well as online, deciding if the article will go online, in print, or both was said to influence how the content is shaped. Several participants of print publications mentioned the print format allows for a different approach than online content and articles can go into more depth in print.

All of the participants of publications with content in print described separating content based on the medium, and several mentioned staggering the online release of printed content in order to preserve exclusivity for their magazine readers. “We don’t publish our current issues because those are exclusive to our members; after six months we put these on our website,” Carly Rixham of *Solar Today* said. Summarizing the difference he sees between mediums, Chris Crowell of *Solar Builder* said, “Like the website I usually, just more news for daily news and kinda stuff maybe everybody has for the most part, you know, maybe keeping up with the latest press releases and general news. And then in the magazine is more the stuff that I’m going out and interviewing people and trying to get more insider, in-depth info on *Solar Builder* exclusive type stuff.”

### **Suggestions for Best Practices**

By conducting 10 in-depth interviews and listening to a range of viewpoints for using narrative within trade media, many possibilities for best practices emerged along the way. The following suggestions for five best practices reflect the opinions and experiences of interviewees as well as the researcher’s understanding of communication literature.

#### **1. Establish standards for using narrative by medium and be consistent**

Whether it’s overly dramatic language, poor website positioning, lack of structure, or a misleading headline, nearly every participant cautioned against using narratives in some way that could detract from the reader’s experience, and therefore, hurt the publication’s online reputation

as a fact-based, data-driven, business-to-business news source. At the same time, the majority of participants asserted that narrative is a more valuable article form, primarily because narratives were said to be more rare, and to hold exclusivity and value longer than argumentative and other article forms.

As suggested by several participants, in order for a narrative to be effectively received by an online reader, the reader should not be caught off guard by an article's form when the headline is selected. Chris Crowell of Solar Builder described how argumentative and narrative can both "serve just their purpose," but it can be annoying to be surprised by a longer narrative online when he was really just looking for something "chunky and sub-headed" where he can quickly scan and find answers to the headline. To avoid surprising the online reader who may be browsing the website for quick-hitting data, the website should be appropriately structured to present a variety of content, and editors can standardize the use of narrative in the most appropriate channels, such as case studies and feature articles. By doing so, the online reader's expectation for the selected content is respected, and they can remain free to choose an article in a more narrative form if they wish to do so.

These boundaries and channels for narrative will vary per publication depending on factors such as whether the publication is in print or just online, the perception of reader preferences, the flexibility of the website structure, as well as underlying policies for positioning submitted content from paid client companies.

## **2. Incentivize content providers to be aware of your audience and to pitch articles using story types**

Several participants expressed frustration with content submitted to their publication by PR companies, as PR companies were said to lack the tact necessary for writing articles that can

be used effectively by the publication's readers. When asked if he had any points to add that the researcher did not ask about, John Parnell of *PV-Tech* was quick to mention "the influence of commercial interests" as an aspect that deserves more consideration. "We occasionally will be asked to regurgitate this stuff, and there's actually quite a lack of awareness when it comes to media relations in the industry," John said. While John partially attributed this lack of awareness to the solar industry being relatively new, he suggested efforts could be made from PR contributors that could benefit trade media publications as well as the PR companies. In terms of how his story selection is influenced, John explained, "we often find that the media relations people we're dealing with don't do us any favors when it comes to finding stories, and yeah it perhaps softens or weakens their influence on what we write, because by and large they're not great at it."

Several other participants expressed similar concerns toward submitted content, and more than one hoped this research could help inform and improve PR companies' awareness. Kathie Zipp of Solar Power World, for example, said that explaining editorial decision-making of trade media would be "very helpful for PR people." Kathie went on to say, "the biggest things that matter to us with the pitches is that you know our audience and does this make sense for it." In return, it is suggested that trade media publications may also be able to help by responding to poor PR content with advice and instructional examples. Using strong examples to facilitate the benefits of stronger article pitches and press releases, such as increasing the likelihood of story selection for publication, may help improve the quality of content submitted in the future.

Furthermore, article pitches with a story type in mind, such as narrative, may ultimately increase the quality, reach, and effectiveness of the final article, benefitting both parties. Examples mentioned of poor PR content commonly included submissions with an overtly sales-

oriented voice using product-focused quotes and headlines instead of application-based content. Market research showing audience metrics may also be referenced to reinforce motivation for PR companies to make more of an effort before circulating unexamined content. Press releases in particular were described as a fundamental source of information and article topics for several participants that can still be used for the readers' benefit if their interests are catered to. As stated by Daubert in 1961, "it is editorial policies, formulated on the basis of the editor's knowledge of his readership, that largely determine how well a publication attracts advertisers" (p. 53).

### **3. Encourage readers to share their own narratives to increase engagement and generate exclusive, community-driven content**

While comments on articles were commonly regarded as a source of feedback, social media was also mentioned as an important tool for maintaining daily editorial responsibilities such as promoting and disseminating new content, tracking industry trends and competitors, and engaging with readers. David Brearley described Solar Pro's audience as a "community" where emerging topics and open-ended questions are discussed and interpreted that often may not have clear-cut answers or resolving data to lean on. These types of topics may align well with "narrative accounts" from communication research that raise "unanswered questions, unresolved conflicts, and/or depicts not yet completed activity" (Green and Brock, 2000, p. 411). Providing a platform for readers to share their personal narratives and interpretations can establish social boundaries for fostering healthy, inclusive engagement while providing potential sources and quotes to be used in future articles.

Chris Crowell of Solar Builder touched on how narratives can unify readers into a community by describing the way his specialized audience relates to exclusive narratives. He

described how narratives allow differentiation from competitors while encouraging inclusion with unique, relatable content. “Make your readers feel like they’re a part of your club, in a way,” Chris suggested. “So I think that being creative and thinking of different ways of sharing a story that relates [is important], like especially for our audience that is specialized.” Digital feedback on social media or the website seems fitting for this type of group interaction, but a simple call-to-action at the beginning of the print magazine requesting story submissions can also have a similar benefit for generating organic discussion and community-driven narratives to be used in future articles.

#### **4. Look for writers who can balance style and structure with industry information**

All of the participants discussed working with industry professionals, as opposed to professional writers, to develop articles, but several participants discussed how employing industry professionals attributes to a lack of style in the writing. Communication research on narrative describes many effects of using narrative style and structure that can benefit the reader, and therefore, the publication. For communication research on narrative in particular, these effects were described in Chapter 2 and include engagement, learning, memory retention, and persuasion. Of these effects of narrative, engagement was the most discussed by participants as a common goal they hoped to achieve with their articles. Kathie Zipp of Solar Power world described the task of shaping industry data into engaging content as a challenge, but a challenge that a skilled writer could accomplish. “We want it to be interesting, engaging, even fun sometimes and it’s not an easy job, especially when you’re talking about technical, dry information, but I think that a good writer can take that and really make it more engaging,” Kathie said.

Although using industry professionals and subject-matter specialists to write articles makes sense in general for trade media, editors should be encouraged to look for professional writers who can also infuse technical content with style and storytelling for more engaging features (especially in print). David Brearley of Solar Pro described the articles he did with a professional writer as some of his “favorite articles to work on” where he was “more interested in the style than the structure.” “The other 95 or 99% of our articles, because we’re working with people who aren’t professional writers, I think we need to let the structure do as much of the work as possible,” David said.

#### **5. Use multiple mediums to generate complimentary forms of content around a particular theme**

By stretching an industry topic into several forms published through multiple mediums, topic depth can be explored using a combination communication channels. This can stretch trending topics for a wider reach, without sacrificing volume news that some online readers may be expecting from website content. John Parnell of *PV-Tech* suggested that narratives can require more work to develop in comparison to volume news, and narratives may not necessarily generate more reader engagement; therefore, predicting reader engagement can be difficult.

By using multiple channels to develop several article forms around the same topic, publications can maximize a topic’s reach and boost variety. For example, by medium, print subscribers can benefit from a longer narrative while online readers can still get the facts in a shorter, quick-hitting news form. Or, in the case of online-only publications, several types of articles can be published together to compliment each other; a narrative case study could be published on one channel of the website and directly link to a press release on another channel of the website.

Providing a variety of content using different mediums was important to many participants, and participants made it clear that the writer has more leeway to tell a longer, more stylistic story in print than online. Videos and podcasts were also mentioned by several participants as mediums that can cater to the narrative form. Using combinations of these mediums and content forms can strengthen the engagement of certain topics by showing different sides of the same topic. “So it is interesting how not only the publication dictates, and the readers dictate whether a narrative is successful, but the medium does too,” Julia Pyper of Greentech Media said. “People have a different expectation with podcasts and they’re willing to listen and follow along.” Kathie Zipp of Solar Power World expressed a similar perspective similar perspective for differentiating between newsletters, videos, and print magazines. “You’re not going to write the same content for maybe a newsletter or to cover in a video than maybe in the print issue,” Kathie explained. If the topic involves legislation for manufacturing solar panels, for example, a short news article published online could use bullet points to highlight the facts and data, while a longer narrative in print and a podcast or video could show that same story from a manufacturer’s point of view.

### **Limitations of Study and Suggestions for Future Research**

From the 22 trade media publications contacted, 14 responded to the researcher, three could not participate, and one was removed due to not being a renewable energy publication. Eight of the 10 editors interviewed in this study were based in the United States, while editors of *PV-Tech* and *Global Solar and Alternative Energies* were based in the UK. All of the publications had a global audience through their websites. Six of the 10 publications were in print as well as online, while the other four publications were online only. Between the time of being contacted and the time of being interviewed, one of the publications stopped publishing



and the website was no longer available. Screenshots of the reference article had been taken and were used during the interview, and the participant asked for the name of the publication to not be revealed. Some sample bias error is possible since participants had to respond voluntarily to the researcher's email request regarding a thesis focused on how trade editor's select articles in different formats. Participants who did not respond or said they could not participate may have had views and opinions of narrative that were not expressed in this study. Furthermore, while eight of the publications were solar-focused publications, two of the publications were more broad renewable energy publications featuring solar.

All interviews were conducted over the phone, and while the researcher tried to transcribe pauses and nuances, phone interviews lack nonverbal cues that face-to-face interviews could reveal. The researcher presented a definition of narrative from narrative research, and selected a narrative example from each publication, but participants own view of narrative could have affected their answers, as variations of narrative exist. Further, the examples of narrative chosen by the researcher for each publication may not have fit the participant's definition, as shown by their varied responses. Similarly, while the researcher provided a description of the argumentative approach from research, interviewees' responses may have been influenced by their own ideas to what argumentative entails.

This research provided a base study that serves as a foundation for possible studies in the future. Future research should elaborate on the relationship between content published by trade media editors, their audience of industry professionals, and paid client content (content marketing and native marketing) in more depth. Case studies on specific trade media organizations could reveal greater depth for how content marketing is changing the types of content being published, and how narrative is being used with content marketing in particular.

Future research could also focus on how trade media can increase public access to industry issues and information. Increasing transparency can improve the industry's understanding, and help journalists find relevant story ideas and tips.

Content analysis on the types of content submitted versus published from PR companies could also help illuminate the frustration participants in this study expressed while supporting editors with research findings to use as a reference for improving submitted content. Future research should also investigate how paid- versus controlled-circulation influences gatekeeping, and the use of narrative. Comparing engagement and reader interaction for narrative in print versus online would further help trade media editors define best uses of narrative per medium. Research should also look at specific elements of narrative, such as imagery and verisimilitude, in more depth to compare the effects on readers in trade media publications.

While the study provided useful insight on English renewable energy trade media publications, future research should explore more homogeneous samples, focusing exclusively on specific countries, or languages other than English.

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## Appendix A

### Initial Recruitment Email

#### **Email Recruitment Dialogue**

As a graduate student at Colorado State University, I am conducting interviews with trade media editors in the renewable energy industry for my thesis, and I think you could provide insights that would enable people to better understand the practices of trade media editors.

I would like to conduct an interview with you or another senior editor at your publication over the phone. I anticipate the interview to last around an hour. I am interviewing trade editors and asking to visit with them to address a series of questions relative to how they select articles in different formats.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary, and the questions present minimal risk no greater than if the editor were interviewed by a colleague or the editor of a trade publication devoted to magazine publishing. Beyond sharing your thoughts with us, and obtaining a synopsis of our results, there is no direct benefit to you. In reporting the data, we'd like to identify you and your publication by name.

I hope you will be interested in sharing your valuable insights. Please simply reply to this email so we can confirm arrangements. If you have any questions about the study or about the interview, please feel free to contact me. I will take the liberty of following up with you in the next several days.

Thank you,

George Lattimore

Journalism and Media Communication

[gwlattim@rams.colostate.edu](mailto:gwlattim@rams.colostate.edu)

(512) 565-9793

## Appendix B

### Follow-Up Email (Invitation Declined or Accepted via Email)

*If DECLINED:*

Hello (name),

Thank you for your time and consideration of our offer for you to participate in our study of trade editors. We regret you cannot participate. Perhaps you know of other renewable energy publications that may have editors interested in this study? We would welcome your suggestions.

Thank you,

George Lattimore

Journalism and Media Communication

[gwlattim@rams.colostate.edu](mailto:gwlattim@rams.colostate.edu)

(512) 565-9793

*If INVITATION ACCEPTED, email consent confirmation reply:*

Hello (name),

Thank you very much for agreeing to be part of my study of trade editors. I would like to give you call in the next several days set up arrangements and confirm a time you can visit over the phone for an hour.

Could you please provide a phone number to reach you on during work hours?

Thank you,

George Lattimore

Journalism and Media Communication

[gwlattim@rams.colostate.edu](mailto:gwlattim@rams.colostate.edu)

(512) 565-9793

## Appendix C

### Script for Telephone Follow-Ups (Response or No Response)

#### **Phone Recruitment Follow-up Script**

##### *A) If No Response to Initial Email and Phone Number Available:*

Hello (insert name). This is George Lattimore at Colorado State University. I sent you an email a few days ago requesting your participation in a thesis study about the practices of trade media editors – have you received it?

##### *If Yes to Receiving Initial Email:*

Great to hear! By participating, you would be helping to improve people's understanding of trade media editors and the important role they play in the renewable energy industry. I anticipate the interview to last around an hour in order to address a series of questions relative to how editors select articles in different formats. Would you like to be a part of this study?

##### *If No to Receiving Initial Email:*

Oh okay, I would like to conduct an interview with you or another senior editor at your publication over the phone. By participating, you would be helping to improve people's understanding of trade media editors and the important role they play in the renewable energy industry. I anticipate the interview to last around an hour in order to address a series of questions relative to how editors select articles in different formats.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary, and the questions present minimal risk no greater than if the editor were interviewed by a colleague or the editor of a trade publication



devoted to magazine publishing. Beyond sharing your thoughts with us, and obtaining a synopsis of our results, there is no direct benefit to you. In reporting the data, we'd like to identify you and your publication by name. Would you like be a part of this study of trade editors?

*If Yes to Participating:*

Thank for you agreeing to participate. Do I have your permission to record the interview and use your name and affiliation in this study about editorial practices? This information will help contribute towards a greater understanding of the role editors play in the publication process.

*If yes:*

Great to hear! Thank you very much. What dates and times in the next few weeks are you available for an hour? (decide date and time).

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to speaking with you on (date). If you have any questions about the study or about the interview, please do not hesitate to email me, [gwlattim@rams.colostate.edu](mailto:gwlattim@rams.colostate.edu), or give me a call at 512-565-9793.

Thank you,

George Lattimore

*If no:*

Thank you for your time. Do you know of any other renewable energy publications with an editor who might be interested in the study that I may contact?

*If no to Participating:*

Thank you for your time. Do you know of any other renewable energy publications with an editor who might be interested in the study that I may contact?

*B) If Responded Yes to Initial Email:*

Hello (insert name). This is George Lattimore at Colorado State University. I promised I would give you a call to set up arrangements regarding a phone interview for my thesis about editorial practices. Thank for you agreeing to participate. Do I have your permission to record the interview and use your name and affiliation in this study about editorial practices? This information will help contribute towards a greater understanding of the role editors play in the publication process.

*If yes for Permission:*

Great to hear! Thank you very much. What dates and times in the next few weeks are you available for an hour? (decide date and time).

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to speaking with you on (date). If you have any questions about the study or about the interview, please do not hesitate to email me,

[gwlattim@rams.colostate.edu](mailto:gwlattim@rams.colostate.edu), or give me a call at 512-565-9793.

Thank you,

George Lattimore

*If not Allowed Permission:*

Thank you for your time. Do you know of any other renewable energy publications with an editor who might be interested in the study that I may contact?

## Appendix D

### Confirmation Email with Informed Consent Disclosures

#### **Confirmation Email**

To: Name

From: George Lattimore

Re: Confirming Interview – Important information

Date: Date

Hello (name),

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in my thesis research pertaining to editorial decision making by trade editors.

I will plan to call your office:

(Date)

(Time)

(Preferred number: xxx-xxx-xxxx)

If you have any questions before then, please contact by email or call me on cell phone, 512-565-9793. I look forward to talking with you (repeat date and time)

Thank you,

George Lattimore

### Important Information About Your Interview

- This study is being conducted by George Lattimore in partial fulfillment of the requirement's for his master's degree in the Department of Journalism and Media Communication at Colorado State University. The purpose of the research is to better understand editorial decision making by editors of trade publications.
- As a participant in this study, you agree to be interviewed over the phone for 45-60 minutes maximum, to allow your conversation to be recorded, and to allow George to recontact you to clarify any key points, if necessary.
- Your participation is voluntary and you retain the right to withdraw from the study at any time. The risks associated with this research are deemed to be minimal -- no greater than you would encounter if talking with a peer about editorial decision-making.
- You have the option of your name and affiliation being included in the study with your comments, or to remain confidential. Please at the time of your interview be prepared to choose between having comments attributed to your name or remaining confidential. I will confirm your desire at the beginning of the interview.
- You will receive a synopsis of key findings that might be useful in your work.
- For questions, or additional information, you may contact adviser Kirk Hallahan ([kirk.hallahan@colostate.edu](mailto:kirk.hallahan@colostate.edu); 970/491-3963) or Colorado State's Institutional Research Board coordinator at ([RICRO\\_IRB@mail.colostate.edu](mailto:RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu); 970-491-1553).

Appendix E

IRB Exempt Form



Research Integrity & Compliance Review Office  
Office of Vice President for Research  
Fort Collins, CO 80523-2011  
(970) 491-1553  
FAX (970) 491-2293

Date: March 20, 2017

To: Kirk Hallahan, Ph.D., Journalism & Media Communication  
George Lattimore, Journalism & Media Communication

From: IRB Coordinator, Research Integrity & Compliance Review Office  
(RICRO\_IRB@mail.colostate.edu)

Re: Trade Editors' Preferences When Selecting Articles

Funding: Unfunded

IRB ID: 045 -18H Review Date: March 20, 2017  
This project is valid from three years from the review date.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) Coordinator has reviewed this project and has declared the study exempt from the requirements of the human subject protections regulations with conditions as described above and as described in 45 CFR 46.101(b):

Category 2 - Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (I) information obtained is recorded in such manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (II) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

The IRB determination of exemption means that:

- This project is valid for three years from the initial review. After the three years, the file will be closed and no further research should be conducted. If the research needs to continue, please let the IRB Coordinator know before the end of the three years. You do not need to submit an application for annual continuing review.
- You must carry out the research as proposed in the Exempt application, including obtaining and documenting (signed) informed consent if stated in your application or if required by the IRB.
- Any modification of this research should be submitted to the IRB through an email to the IRB Coordinator, prior to implementing any changes, to determine if the project still meets the Federal criteria for exemption.
- Please notify the IRB Coordinator (RICRO\_IRB@mail.colostate.edu) if any problems or complaints of the research occur.

Please note that you must submit all research involving human participants for review by the IRB. Only the IRB or designee may make the determination of exemption, even if you conduct a similar study in the future.

## Colorado State University Institutional Review Board (IRB)

### REQUEST FOR EXEMPTION

(Administrative Review) for the Use of Human Subjects in Research

**APPLICATION INSTRUCTIONS:** Complete this form and submit with all required attachments to the RICRO IRB staff via email at: [RICRO\\_IRB@mail.colostate.edu](mailto:RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu). You may also submit the form and attachments as a hard copy. Mail to: RICRO, IRB Team, Campus Delivery #2011; Suite #208; University Services Center. **NOTE:** The form is protected for your convenience to tab through the form. If you need to unprotect the document, please contact the CSU IRB at: [RICRO\\_IRB@mail.colostate.edu](mailto:RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu); 970-491-1553.

#### PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION

**Title of Project:** *Trade Editors' Preferences When Selecting Articles*

**Principal Investigator (PI):** *Kirk Hallahan* email: [Kirk.Hallahan@colostate.edu](mailto:Kirk.Hallahan@colostate.edu)

**Department:** *Journalism and Media Communication* phone: 970-491-3963

(for student projects; PI must be advising faculty member)

**Co-Principal Investigator (Co-PI):** *George Lattimore* email: [gwlattim@rams.colostate.edu](mailto:gwlattim@rams.colostate.edu)

**Department:** *Journalism and Media Communication* phone: (512) 565-9793

**Source of funding:** *No external funding*

If externally funded, include PASS number if known: *enter pass number here*

Please provide a copy of the grant proposal, if applicable.

**Indicate the anticipated start for this project:** *March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017*

Upon final review, the protocol will be valid for three years and then administratively closed; unless otherwise noted.

**Rank of PI:** ☒ Faculty

☐ Other: *describe here*

**Rank of Co-PI:** ☐ Faculty ☐ PhD student

☒ Master's Student ☐ Undergraduate

☐ Other: *describe here*

(for student projects; PI must be advising faculty member)

#### PART II: PROJECT DESCRIPTION

1. Provide a brief **lay summary** for all study activities. Please provide a copy of the grant, thesis/dissertation methods section if applicable.

*\*Copy of Methods section attached as separate file*

*Research for this Plan A Master's Thesis will begin upon IRB approval (ideally no later than March 25, 2017), when the Co-PI plan to conduct interviews with 14-16 trade media editors in order to understand their preferences for selecting articles.*

*Specifically, the researchers are interested in preferences for narrative-based articles (which tell stories in a format that typically includes a beginning, middle and end) versus argument-based articles (which rely on statistics and arguments typically arranged in a hierarchical or non-story structure).*

1. **Please address the generalizability of the data.** Do you plan to share the results of this research with the intent to influence behavior, practice, theory, future research designs (e.g., Plan A Master's thesis, Dissertation, manuscript, presentation at a national meeting)? If the results of this research are for internal purposes only, this study is not under the IRB's purview. For more information regarding generalizability, see:  
<https://vprnet.research.colostate.edu/RICRO/irb/what-is-generalizable-knowledge/>

*The results of this Plan A Master's thesis are intended to better understand the role of narrative persuasion in technical communication and possibly could be published in an academic or professional journal or presented at a national or regional conference. The results are not necessarily generalizable beyond trade publications nor the industry sector to be investigated (solar and renewal energy).*

2. **Describe the participant population, including age range and inclusion/exclusion criteria. State the maximum number of how many participants will be recruited.** NOTE: Please submit all recruitment materials (e.g., flyer, email, verbal script) that may be used. See our website for recruitment requirements and templates:  
<https://vprnet.research.colostate.edu/RICRO/irb/templates/recruitment-templates-worksheets/>

*The participant population for this thesis study will be editors for major trade media, almost all of which are college educated, both males and females. It is anticipated most will be 30 years of age or older, based on having had sufficient editorial experience to assume the role of editor at a trade publication. Editors will be selected using a convenience sample from databases listing editorial contacts for publications in the industry; there are no other bases for excluding prospective participants.*

**Describe how consent will be obtained from participants.** Participants may not need to document their consent with a signed consent form, but they still must be given information about the research in order to provide their informed consent. Generally, for low-risk research, **documented** consent can be **waived** because: 1) the identity of the



1. participants will not be collected; or 2) personal identifiers will be removed prior to the data being sent to the researcher.

A waiver of documented consent requires that these two criteria be met:

- The research presents no more than minimal risk & involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of the research context.

If a waiver of documented consent is being requested, please be sure that the following consent elements are contained in the consent document (cover letter and/or consent/recruitment text/script):

- that the research is being performed by CSU personnel
- the purpose of the research
- state what participants are being asked to do and for how long
- that participation is voluntary, and what direct risks or benefits exist, if any
- how the information will be held confidential, e.g., no names will be collected and data will reported in aggregate
- contact information for the investigator(s) and for the IRB participant's rights contact, contact the Colorado State University Institutional Review Board Coordinator at [RICRO\\_IRB@mail.colostate.edu](mailto:RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu) or 970-491-1553."

Please submit your consent document (verbal script, cover letter or signed document) with your Exempt application, and if requesting to waive signed (documented) consent, provide your rationale for this waiver.

Prospective participants will be solicited by email, with follow-up emails and telephone calls. Upon committing to be interviewed, the Co-PI will review key informed consent elements; a written summary is provided in the email sent to confirmed participants. The language contained in the email (see Appendix D) is reproduced below under "Important Information ..."

Participants will be asked for permission to use their name and affiliation. Otherwise, they will have the option to be anonymous. Based on the nature of the topics and culture of the journalism, it not anticipated that journalists would object to attributions.

#### Important Information About Your Interview

- This study is being conducted by George Lattimore in partial fulfillment of the requirement's for his master's degree in the Department of Journalism and
- Media Communication at Colorado State University. The purpose of the research is to better understand editorial decision making by editors of trade publications.
- As a participant in this study, you agree to be interviewed over the phone for about one hour, to allow your conversation to be recorded, and to allow George to recontact you to clarify any key

Prospective participants will be solicited by email, with follow-up emails and telephone calls. Upon committing to be interviewed, the Co-PI will review key informed consent elements; a written summary is provided in the email sent to confirmed participants. The language contained in the email (see Appendix D) is reproduced below under "Important Information ...."

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- As a participant in this study, you agree to be interviewed over the phone for about one hour, to allow your conversation to be recorded, and to allow George to recontact you to clarify any key points, if necessary.
- Your participation is voluntary and you retain the right to withdraw from the study at any time. The risks associated with this research are deemed to be minimal -- no greater than you would encounter if talking with a peer about editorial decision-making.
- You have agreed to allow us to include your name and affiliation in tandem with your comments.
- You will receive a synopsis of key findings that might be useful in your work.
- For questions, or additional information, you may contact adviser Kirk Hallahan ([kirk.hallahan@colostate.edu](mailto:kirk.hallahan@colostate.edu); 970/491-3963) or Colorado State's Institutional Research Board coordinator at ([RICRO\\_IRB@mail.colostate.edu](mailto:RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu); 970-491-1553).

1. **Describe how data will be collected, recorded, and stored/maintained.** Describe the procedures in place that will protect the privacy of the subjects and maintain the confidentiality of the data. If a linked list is used, explain when the linked list will be destroyed, who will have access to the data, and location of the data. Provide a sample of the code that will be used, if applicable. NOTE:

- a. CSU Policy: Information Technology and Security:  
<http://policylibrary.colostate.edu/policy.aspx?id=492>
- b. Reminder: Federal Regulations require that study data and consent documents be kept for a minimum of three (3) years after the completion of the study by the PI securely at CSU. Student researchers: You may keep a copy of your data.

*Interview conversations will be recorded from phone calls and transcribed. The transcripts will be used solely by the Co-PI, who will store the data on a personal computer, with a backup copy maintained by the PI. Upon conclusion, the recording files, written transcripts and associated workpapers will be retained and stored by the Department of Journalism and Media Communication in keeping with federal records retention guidelines.*

2. **Describe all study procedures, including topics that will be discussed in interviews and/or surveys.** Please attach the interview questions or survey questions, if applicable.

*In-depth interviews will be conducted over the phone in which the interviewer will ask trade media editors a series of questions about what criteria they look for in articles for publishing. Topics will focus on how trade media editors gauge the importance versus interestingness of content, and in particular, their preferences for narrative structure and style versus argumentation. Interviews will be recorded and then transcribed for analysis using the Constant Comparison method described in Grounded Theory.*

3. **Which Exemption category does your study fit? Please review the list of categories here:** <https://vprnet.research.colostate.edu/RICRO/irb/submit-a-protocol/exempt-submissions/exemption-criteria/>

2

4. **If you have selected Exempt #2:** If your data will include identifiers, please address if disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research may place the subjects at risk in the following areas: **criminal or civil liability, or be damaging to the subject's financial standing, employability, or reputation** (e.g., potential risks associated with recruitment of employees or students).

*This research will include identifiers and present a risk no greater than if trade media editors were interviewed by a news reporter or trade publication about their editorial decision making preferences and practices. Disclosing editorial strategies would pose no particular risk to the publication.*

**As the principal investigator, I assure the IRB that all procedures performed under this project will be conducted exactly as outlined in this form and that any modification to this protocol will be submitted to an IRB Coordinator in the form of an amendment for its approval prior to implementation.**

**Principal Investigator:**

Kirk Hallahan Kirk Hallahan  
\_\_\_\_\_ enter date here March 20, 2017  
(typed/printed name) (signature, if paper copy) 3/8/2017 (date)

**WHEN COMPLETE:**

**Email electronic version from PI's email address to:** the CSU IRB at:

[RICRO\\_IRB@mail.colostate.edu](mailto:RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu); 970-491-1553.

Sent email will serve as electronic signature from PI.

**OR** Deliver signed original copy to: IRB Team, RICRO, 601 S. Howes, Street, Suite #208,  
Campus Delivery 2011

**Note on Review Timeline:** Not providing all associated files with the submission of this form will impact the time it takes IRB staff to complete the exempt determination.

## Appendix F

### Interview Guide

Email or phone confirmation has been received from the participant, and the researcher calls participant at agreed upon time on correct date. Researcher will answer any questions the participant has and then confirm permission to record the interview and identify the participant in the results and directly attribute quotes. Researcher will follow this set of questions, but may change the order or ask additional questions based on each individual interview. Researcher will use probes to ensure that participant responses do not end at a yes/no response.

#### Background Questions

- **Could you briefly summarize your educational & professional background?**
  - *If not answered: How long have you been an editor at this publication, and how many years has your publication been publishing trade media?*
- **As the editor, could briefly describe your responsibilities?**
- **How many people do you have on staff?**
- **Does your publication publish online or in print?**

1. **I'm interested in hearing how you develop and obtain articles. Do you publish articles written by staff, freelance writers or PR sources, or a combination of these?**

- a. **Do you also cross-link articles originally published elsewhere? *If so, from what sources?***

2. **Narrative storytelling has become a hot topic. How do you think it compares with articles using other story structures?**

- a. *Other examples include inverted pyramid, numbered lists, or arguments featuring statistics.*
- b. *Inverted pyramid has been described as paragraphs packed with key facts and arranged in descending order of importance (Harrower, 2013)*

**3. One of the benefits of narrative is that people often consider it more interesting than other forms of articles. Do you think the use of narrative verse non-narrative structure affects the readers' reception of the ideas?**

- a. **What do you think is the relationship between an article's interestingness versus its importance? Probe for depth and be prepared to explain importance and interestingness as a summary of news values.**
- b. **Do you think articles using narratives are more engaging? Why or why not?**
  - i. *If they ask what I mean by narrative: One definition of narrative is stories with "structure and conflict, problem and denouement, rising action and falling action, a beginning, a middle and end" (Bennett, 1973, p. 153).*
  - ii. *If they ask what I mean by argumentation: argumentation has been described as "plotless, characterless, and narrated" (Deighton et al., 1989, p. 336), and "leads to attitude change via logical consideration and evaluation of arguments" (Green & Brock, 2000, p. 702)*

**4. Which is more important: writing style or article structure? *Why?***

- a. *If asked or need help, give clues: Narrative structure has been defined as chronology and causality formed by “[linking] goals, actions, and outcomes over time (Escalas et al., 2004, p. 108).*
- b. *If asked or need help: Writing style may include elements such as vividness - information that is “likely to attract and hold our attention and to excite the imagination...” (Nisbett & Ross, 1980, p. 45)*

**5. I would like to hear your thoughts on one of the articles you recently published. The title is “[INSERT TITLE]” from “[INSERT DATE].” Could you please open it up through the link in the most recent email or the attachment of images.**

- a. **Why was this article selected for publication?**
- b. **How would you classify this category of article?**
- c. **Do you think it’s a good example of a narrative story? *Why or why not?***
- d. **Do you think narratives are more valuable than other forms of articles?**
  - i. *If not addressed, clarify if more valuable to the publication or to the reader.*
- e. **Do you think narratives are more persuasive? *Why or why not?***
  - i. *If needed, refer to narrative and argumentation definitions above in Question 4.*

- 6. What is most important when you're selecting articles: market research, ideas of audience reaction, or your personal reaction? *Why?***

*\*[If time left, choose from the optional questions numbered below]*

- 7. Are there any other comments you'd like to add?**
- 8. Thank you for your time. Are there other trade media publications involving solar that you can suggest?**

**[Optional]**

*Trade Article Development*

- 1. Do you help shape the content and information when an article is being developed? *How so?***
- i. Probe for various routes of article generation.*

*Trade Article Conceptualization*

- 2. In light of the many common themes that exist across publications in the renewable energy industry, what types of benefits do your readers expect from your publication in particular?**
- b. Do you trust your personal response to an article as a measure for how your readers will react as well?**
- i. Why or why not? Probe.*



*Importance of Message Characteristics*

- 3. What types of content are typically shaped into a narrative structure?**

*Preference in Persuasion*

- 4. Are there certain elements of narrative that you think are more effective for persuasion than others? *If needed, provide examples such as vivid language, concrete details, transitional characters, and dramatic structure.***
  - i. If so, which ones? Why?*

## Appendix G

### Narrative Reference Examples

Table 2. Narrative Reference Examples

| <b>Publication</b>            | <b>Article Title</b>                                                            | <b>Classification from Participant</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | <b>Did participant think article was good example of a narrative?</b> |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Renewable Energy World</i> | Is the Suniva Bankruptcy a Canary in the Coal Mine for Solar?                   | News Feature                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Yes                                                                   |
|                               | First paragraph                                                                 | “In the satiric movie Network, Howard Beale said: “Edward George Ruddy died today! Edward George Ruddy was the Chairman of the Board of the Union Broadcasting Systems and he died at eleven o'clock this morning of a heart condition! And woe is us! We're in a lot of trouble!!””                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                       |
| <i>Solar Power World</i>      | Moss has utility-scale solar zipped up                                          | Contractor's Corner (case study)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Yes                                                                   |
|                               | First paragraph                                                                 | “With more than 500 employees across the United States and the Caribbean, Moss is an established construction player in many large markets. Founded in 2004, the Fort Lauderdale, Florida-headquartered company has experience in building stadiums, universities, airports, high-rises and, since 2009, solar. Moss has since been involved with 1.6 GW of utility-scale solar projects in the United States and Canada. Not bad for a company that wasn't even looking to get into the green industry.” |                                                                       |
| <i>Solar Builder</i>          | Chicago steps up: City buildings to run on 100 percent renewable energy by 2025 | News                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Yes                                                                   |

|                          |                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                          | First paragraph                                                                 | “A group of Chicago’s political leaders jointly announced their commitment to move their buildings’ electricity use to 100 percent renew-able energy by 2025 this week. When implemented, Chicago will be the largest major city in the country to have a 100 percent renewable energy supply for its public buildings.”                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <i>Just Means</i>        | Solar Powered: Enactus Students Use Solar Power to Change Lives in South Africa | Editorial                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | “Not the best narrative,” but also that “it does support that structure a little bit” and “tries to tell the story of Chicago after you get the initial news hit as to... how it developed.” |
|                          | First paragraph                                                                 | “”As members of Enactus, these entrepreneurial students transform discarded resources into a sustainable business model that's relieving pressure on peoples' wallets and cleaning up their community.” —J.P. Bilbrey, CEO and President of The Hershey Company, talking about Enactus students from CIDA City Campus in Johannesburg, South Africa. Their project, Izenzomusa makes hot water accessible through solar power.” |                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <i>Solar Novus Today</i> | Installations: Sailing Away with Lightweight, Flexible Solar                    | Case Study                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | *No answer<br>*Participant was driving during interview and did not respond to follow up emails                                                                                              |
|                          | First paragraph                                                                 | “Chris Phillips is the proud owner of a Hake Yachts Seaward 32RK sailboat docked in San Carlos, Sonora, (Mexico), a five-hour drive from his home near Tucson, Arizona (US). One of his greatest joys is taking his boat out for a weekend sail or a more leisurely weeks-long vacation cruise.”                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <i>Solar Today</i>       | Anonymous Donor Funds Six Solar Installations                                   | Success Story                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Yes                                                                                                                                                                                          |

|                                              |                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |     |
|----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
|                                              | First paragraph                                               | <p>“Solar Ypsi is a group of volunteers who educate, design, and install photovoltaic (PV) systems around Ypsilanti, Michigan. Started in 2005, SolarYpsi has given over 200 face-to-face presentations to over 5,000 people at local events and reached over a quarter million views on YouTube (<a href="http://SolarYpsi.org/GoogleVideo.html">SolarYpsi.org/GoogleVideo.html</a>) in 2011 when Google featured SolarYpsi in a nationally televised commercial. Founder Dave Strenski has been invited to speak at dozens of local organizations and gave a TEDx talk in 2013 (<a href="http://SolarYpsi.org/TEDxVideo.html">SolarYpsi.org/TEDxVideo.html</a>). His dream is to make Ypsilanti a “Solar Destination,” a place to learn about solar energy with hundreds of examples around town (<a href="http://SolarYpsi.org/AerialVideos.html">SolarYpsi.org/AerialVideos.html</a>).”</p> |     |
| <i>Global Solar and Alternative Energies</i> | Now, Solar Nanotech Powered Clothing                          | Press Release                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Yes |
|                                              | First paragraph                                               | <p>“Marty McFly’s self-lacing Nikes in Back to the Future Part II inspired a UCF scientist, who has developed filaments that harvest and store the sun’s energy, and can be woven into textiles. The breakthrough would essentially turn jackets and other clothing into wearable, solar-powered batteries than never need to be plugged in. It could one day revolutionize wearable technology, helping everyone from soldiers who now carry heavy loads of batteries to a texting-addicted teen who could charge his smartphone by simply slipping it in a pocket.”</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |     |
| <i>Solar Pro</i>                             | Frey Electric Construction Company: Buffalo Harbor State Park | Project Profile                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Yes |

|                        |                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                        | First paragraph                                  | “The Safe Harbor Marina at Buffalo Harbor State Park is home to over 1,000 boat slips, as well as a restaurant and bait shop on Lake Erie’s eastern shore, just south of downtown Buffalo, New York. The 190-acre Buffalo Harbor State Park opened to the public in May 2015. The New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (NYS OPRHP) improved the harbor’s break wall in 2016 with the addition of a bike and walking path, landscaping and two custom pergola structures. The artificial peninsula does not have access to ac power. The NYS OPRHP contracted Frey Electric to design and install a stand-alone PV-powered LED lighting system on each of the break wall’s pergolas to provide dusk-to-dawn lighting for park visitors.” |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <i>PV-Tech</i>         | West Africa Solar takes first steps forwards     | Feature                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | “A little bit less narrative, but at least it starts off with Who, What, When, Where, and then we maybe get a little bit more of a narrative after that, but yeah.”                                                                                                               |
|                        | First paragraph                                  | “The second Solar and Off-Grid Renewables West Africa event in Ghana in April heard mixed views on the progress of solar in the region. But with the first projects reaching completion and others moving forward, brighter times seem to be around the corner. Tom Kenning reports.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <i>Greentech Media</i> | GE Can Now Put Battery Storage on Any Powerplant | Straight News                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Not a strong narrative – “Not the way I’m thinking of narrative, no. I think of it more as, no, straight news piece... Yeah, no, the lead and everything is pretty much this is the most current news, and then he breaks it down so I don’t think it’s a super narrative story.” |
|                        | First paragraph                                  | “GE's steam, gas and wind turbines make up one-third of electricity capacity around the world. Now the industrial giant has the capability to layer batteries on top of all those generators, if desired.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |

## Appendix H

### Extended Review of Participants' Comments

#### **RQ1 - Trade Article Development**

How do trade editors go about developing and selecting a good article? In particular, do they rely on their own subjective perception to gauge the impact, ideas of audience reactions, insights from market research, or something else?

#### **Jennifer Runyon, Editor-in-Chief, *Renewable Energy World***

Jennifer confirmed that articles are written in-house by her and another editor, as well as submitted to them by contributors, freelancers, and PR sources. They publish “contributor articles” and prefer content to be exclusive, and will occasionally republish blogs and crosslink back to the original blog for reference.

When selecting between different types of articles submitted from contributors and freelance writers, Jennifer leaned heavily towards “a gut feeling” over market research and ideas of how the audience might react, and “that’s kinda the best way to describe it.” She listed timeliness and relevancy for her audience of renewable energy professionals as preceding factors for an article or topic to be considered, but described the actual decision as mostly black and white. “It’s like yeah this is good or no this isn’t.”

When evaluating freelancers, she stated writing style is more important to her than structure because she wants to make sure they can tell a “compelling” story.

As Jennifer receives pitches for companies or new products, she considers what type of article would be best for that content: Editorial opinion if “they need to argue it,” straight news, or narrative if they, for example, “need to tell the story of this company’s demise or this solar trade case, or battery storage for homeowners.”

On the other hand, if Jennifer has a topic she’d like an article written about, she considers her “team of freelancers and... what would work for that person,” and “who would be good writing about the topic I want to cover.” She then gets them started with a few press releases on the topic or someone she’d really like them to interview.

Once she receives the article, she begins directly shaping the content by thoroughly reading and then editing to make sure it’s “clickable” with “compelling” headlines. She attributed a high level of importance to preserving the writer’s unique voice because she sees her publication as “the voice of the industry” and “the industry is diverse and it’s got a lot of voice so I want all those voice to be out there.” Although other publications may opt for uniformity of voice across their articles, she values the opposite, as she doesn’t “want every story to sound like exactly like the same person could have written it all.”

Jennifer stated that they try to publish all types of articles of varying lengths, but “as a trend over the decade,” they have shortened the length of stories due to reader’s spending less time on a single article. She mentioned she feels “lucky” to get 3 minutes out of a reader, and as a result, *Renewable Energy World* “used to look for articles that were like 1500 to 2000 words, and now we try to max out at 1200 words.”

*Renewable Energy World* publishes 6 newsletters as well as a bimonthly magazine digitally. The magazine content is emailed to subscribers with the digital content “laid out just

like a magazine.” They are involved “really heavily on social media to get it out there,” and felt that going digital with their content makes sense as the publication is “all about renewable and sustainability.”

**Kathie Zipp, Managing Editor, *Solar Power World***

Kathie explained that she and the two other editors write “most of it,” with some articles included from contributors as well. They do not use freelancers since they have plenty of “contributed articles” from “people within the solar industry, whether that’s contractors, or whether that’s from the manufacturer perspective, or from 3<sup>rd</sup> party kinda organizations that are excited to see their name in print and share their expertise.”

Expanding on their contributed content, Kathie said “content marketing” has become popular as a “new marketing approach that a lot of companies are trying to pursue.” Companies will send in articles or blogs they think might be relevant for her audience, and she will crosslink the content on her page if she thinks “it’s a good article and the company is not talking about themselves.” She prefers the content to be exclusive, meaning it hasn’t been shared anywhere else.

Kathie also described another channel for articles called “Contractor Corner studies,” where she or another editor will interview a solar contractor. “Basically our audience is solar contractors so I know every month we will reach out to a future different contractor, and we’ll do podcasts, and we ask them some questions about their business and the industry,” she said.

As for the ideas for the articles, Kathie said they have developed lots of contacts and keep a list of story topics generated from submissions. She regularly receives pitches from PR firms and said that while some are “great,” others lack audience understanding, wasting her time as well as theirs. For her to select a pitch, it has to “have a story, that’s not just about your company [and] that’s not a sales pitch, because consumers are getting smarter than ever, and they’re going to know if you’re just trying to sell your product. It has to be something helpful to them.”

Kathie said she also talks with people at trade shows and subscribes to many other organizations and publications newsletters within the solar industry. When selecting between various pitches from contributors and PR firms, Kathie said the biggest factor for selection is that writers know the audience and does the content make sense for it. She explained that “a lot of the things [they] get contributed are shorter blog pieces,” and most of the narrative stories that they publish are written in-house where they can interview a couple people.

Kathie explained that “a lot of the things [they] get contributed are shorter blog pieces,” and most of the narrative stories that they publish are written in-house so they can interview a couple people. Since most pitches submitted aren’t completed articles, they decide if the content is relevant for their audience, and prefer to work with the writer using an outline where they list questions needed and word count. “And so, it depends, a lot of times we work from like word count and stuff and specify that more than style. But I think that is an important piece, you know do we want it to be written in first person, is it a short blog, or do we want it to be more of a story,” she said.

Publishing content across a variety of mediums is important to Kathie. Podcasts, blogs, crosslinking, videos, newsletters, print magazine, and online articles are all created by her and two other editors. In terms of their approach to articles, Kathie and her team try to focus on, “always writing the information in a way that’s easy for people to understand. Especially because a lot of people in the solar industry have different levels of experience.” The design for the in-print magazine is very important to her as well and she’s proud of how engaging the

magazine is to flip through. Providing variety of content as well as article types was mentioned, as Kathie thinks, “it takes a variety of different approaches to articles to really satisfy the reader.” They focus on is providing content “on the user’s terms. And that’s why we’re everywhere and it’s not easy.”

### **Chris Crowell, Managing Editor, *Solar Builder***

Since Chris is the only writer or editor on his small team, he uses PR companies “as much as possible” in order to publish four stories a day on the website. He says the website content is usually “daily news” including “keeping up with the latest press releases and general news.”

The magazine is published six times a year, and while Chris tries to write as many of the stories himself as possible, he uses one freelancer-submitted article per print issue, totaling 6 freelance articles a year.

Chris mainly uses his “gut feeling” with some market research, such as web traffic and reader surveys, to choose between topics and submitted articles. While market research helps back up his decision making, he’s mostly “in [his] own head about if [they’ve] covered it yet or if it’s interesting or fresh or makes sense.”

Shaping content to fit his audience is important. Chris acknowledges that “content marketing is really big right now,” so when he receives content from an outside source that is overtly trying to sell a product, he will tailor the how the story is told for his audience, so that it “can still be objective and [written] it in a way that is interesting and draws people in, and I think that ends up working better than writing it in a more aggressive argumentative style.”

Chris is the only editor, and uses one freelance article per print issue. Chris described using the website for press releases and more general news, while the in-print magazine is “more the stuff that I’m going out and interviewing people and trying to get more insider, in-depth info on *Solar Builder* exclusive type stuff.” Content created for the print magazine is slowly posted online, and Chris tries to “lead each e-news with an original feature from the previous print magazine to keep them somewhat fresh and in front of people. And I just try to put stuff in as many different places, cause you never know where someone’s going to read something.”

### **John Howell, Editorial Director, *Just Means***

According to John, their “core business” comes from directly or indirectly repurposing press releases about sustainability submitted by companies who pay them to publish their content, and so they “invented the editorial content to support [their] clients who have a lot of good news. “We would take our clients news release and put it in an editorial format and put it in an editorial column, which gives it a whole different set of readers and viewers and is perceived differently,” John said.

John asserts that because they publish news directly from clients, he uses his “instincts” to identify the recurring topics being focused on by his clients. He will then “commission articles or look for articles [they] should be doing on that subject.” If he feels like he doesn’t know something, he will “go out and find somebody who does.” Although John ascribes his selection choices to his “instincts,” he further asserts his instincts are “honed... informed... resting on something.”

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something, he will “go out and find somebody who does.” Although John ascribes his selection choices to his “instincts,” he further asserts his instincts are “honed... informed... resting on something.”

According to John, *Just Means* is primarily an editorial-based site, and there are three types of articles published: a 300-400 word “news release from a client about some news of the day” where his writers are “basically adapting a news release,” an 800 or more word article based on one or more news sources “not press releases,” and a third article type, a “passionate interests” blog, where “somebody’s a little more journalistic, a little more storytelling, and a little more personal.” John classifies articles over a thousand words as feature articles. For blogs, John encourages writers to “use first person and inject opinion whenever they want,” because it “isn’t objective.”

John asserts he uses his contacts and experts in various areas of sustainability to decide how long an article should be for a topic. He asserts that, “a smart editor gets a staff of contributors who know a lot more than he does.” John attributes a big part of his job as the editor to finding various experts in areas involving sustainability, and then assigning them topics with press releases or news as a basis to build on and adapt.

In terms of the shaping he performs as the editor, John asserts he spends 75 percent of his time “editing down, shortening” content. He asserts that the *Just Means* audience is comprised of readers who have “already self-selected in a way,” are “looking for what [they] produce.” In turn, he tries to “tag it, flag it, keyword it, present the data in a clear, simple format, so that you can get to this information.”

John asserts that the content they publish is “advocacy journalism, service journalism, not independent, and it does have a filter of, “We want to know about solutions. We want to know about progress. We want to know about action, initiative, the partnerships.”” The bottom line, he says, is that they focus on “positive news” and “progress.” In other words, John describes their content as having two levels of filters. The first being a “service to current clients and/or perspective clients,” and the second being “positive news” focused on “solutions” rather than problems.

*Just Means* is an online only publication that distributes press releases, news articles, editorials, and video content “under the headline of the old print publishing days, service journalism or advocacy journalism.”

### **Anne Fischer, Managing Editor, *Solar Novus Today***

*Solar Novus Today* is only online, publishes contributed articles from companies, as well as a feature article every Monday which Anne, as the Managing Editor and cofounder, writes herself or assigns to a freelance writer or “contributing editor.” Anne begins planning topics for the next year on the editorial calendar at least six months before, “which requires a lot of looking into what’s happening in the industry and what are the key trends and what are people going to be interested in.” It’s a “flexible” schedule, and they try to “keep the topics fairly general.” She tries to assign articles the quarter before, three months at a time, and does the first edit on “everything that comes in” before she hands off to an editor. They do not crosslink articles, but will link to their own market research articles with *Solar Novus Today*.

Anne asserts that they don’t receive a lot of finished articles, and for publishing, “a lot of the decision is driven by the type of article that it is.” According to Anne, most of their articles “are solicited,” and the approach the writer should take is discussed in advance after receiving a

“brief outline” from the freelance writer, and deciding “on what the best style would be for communicating that information.”

Anne asserts that PR are sources are used “basically as a contact to the company” where “a company’s spokesperson” would write the article, and they “try to get real experts in the field to write them rather than having a marketing-oriented piece.” For freelancers, she has contacts with “different specialties” and knows “who would be the best person” to write an article on a specific topic. So the writer she assigns the article to depends on the topic.

According to Anne, being an online only publication has many advantages, “One of which is speed,” since they don’t have to “wait 3 months to send things off to the printer.” They publish contributed articles, features articles (once a week), research articles, newsletters, podcasts, webinars, white papers, and videos.

### **Carly Rixham, Editor/Art Editor/Publisher, *Solar Today***

Carly asserts that Solar Today publishes quarterly in print using content from around 12 regular contributors, with some crosslinking and blogging involved online. She tries to publish a “blend of technical, policy, and other nontechnical advocacy-type work, and promotional of solar and other renewables.”

Carly asserts her decision making is based on a “gut feeling” that she cultivates by keeping a “finger on the pulse of what’s happening in the industry.” She does this by curating a bi-weekly newsletter of what’s the current news and “what’s new and hot.” She asserts that by having a “good feeling of trends” and “good taste,” she can be confident that what she’s interested in will be interesting to others. Her team will then provide feedback and give their opinions as well.

Carly relies on “around a dozen” contributors to submit articles, working with the writers to make sure edits from her team are approved by the writers. Visual presentation is very important to Carly, and she works with a design assistant to “put it all together into a layout” emphasizing imagery as possible, because she thinks “people are drawn to design, and beautiful pictures.”

According to Carly, all of their articles on their website are in the magazine, but not all of their magazine articles are the website. Current print issue articles aren’t published online until six months after print is released in order to keep those articles exclusive to their print subscribers.

### **Trevor Galbraith, Content Manager/Editor, *Global Solar and Alternative Energies***

Trevor asserts that they published content from “a combination of columnists... some on the business side, most on the technology side,” with support from “industry customers” submitting press releases and “interesting news items” for the website. A “news desk” handled press releases and “anything that comes in that is industry related,” and then “publishes it on the website.”

Trevor asserts he relies on a combination of “a pretty strong gut feeling of what’s topical,” and market research for choosing topics and articles. He says if “something comes in using market research that’s saying there’s a new technology coming through, for example,” he’s “going to be interested.”

According to Trevor, “conflict-driven narratives in business-to-business media” are avoided because “business-to-business media always works in a small defined space, and you have a defined audience, and you also have a smaller defined advertising base, and you can’t

afford to piss these guys off. They're your bread and butter, it's as simple as that." In contrast to publications like the Wall Street Journal that have an advertising base of "basically the whole audience of the United States and all the advertisers there in," Trevor asserts that business-to-business media can't afford to publish news that reflects negatively on any of their "industry customers," and when press releases come in about legal cases from industry customers, they "generally don't publish it."

Trevor explained that "most magazines will limit their articles to 1500 words," but they "plan not to limit" their articles in favor of depth. Trevor asserts that when one of his readers finds an article in his magazine that applies to them, "he doesn't want to know the public version," "he wants to know the whole nine yards." Trevor further asserts his audience likes "being informed with columnists," so his publication chooses columnists "carefully to make sure they are experts in the field."

Trevor asserts that they "know the areas of technology and the areas of business and industry that are driving [their] readers," and "try to cater to that." He stated that *Global Solar and Alternative Energies* is based around "the premise that [they] were going to drive up business in the parts of the world where our customers make money, and then deliver media products in that theater to port it to them." Since the access and use of the internet varies greatly around the world, Trevor expressed that it can be difficult to reach and manage solar industry in foreign countries such as China or Korea.

### **David Brearley, Senior Technical Editor, *Solar Pro***

According to David, the article generation process starts by receiving a pitch from "subject-matter experts" that introduce the "the project, and then they pass a couple screens." David asserted *Solar Pro* doesn't publish any "advertorial content," but instead, they encourage advertisers to establish themselves as an "opinion thought leader" by telling them to bring "great technical content, leave the sales pitch at the door." David asserted he is the primary point of contact for most feature article authors, and most of them are "professional engineers" who "who are writing for the magazine on codes and standards, designing and installing systems, maybe have different specialties." According to David, they "rarely work with unsolicited manuscripts," and never publish submitted content without editing.

David also explained there's a "fair amount of staff writing," and he writes a "research-intensive" article about every other issue that he described as a "strange mix of journalism and a research paper." For these staff written articles, David tries to "look for content that's speaking" to his activities "on a day-to-day basis, and certainly stuff that solves problems." Once David finds a topic, he says he "sometimes need to go out and find those subject-matter experts" for help with that topic. The Project Profiles are "sort of self-populating" since they "rarely have to reach out to people" and use a template to put it together. David said that they're "typically booked a couple issues in advance for those profiles."

David asserted that although he thinks "there's a movement to more advertorial content," they "don't do that," and "kind of have a firewall between the editorial and advertising content." They encourage advertisers to submit content as a Project Profile instead, and actively screen submissions.

David divides the content they receive into two categories: shorter topics for the quality assurance department, and longer feature articles. For the shorter quality assurance department articles, David asserts that all they're looking for is "a compelling idea for an article." He said they "might see a little rough draft," but in general it's just a short pitch, and since none of their

contributors are professional writers, “it’s really kind of difficult for authors to get too far.” “They don’t have a lot of sophisticated skills in terms of how they present their content,” David said.

For the feature articles, if David and the other editor decide the pitch passes the screens, David sends a template back to the writer to gather technical information in “an outline for 450 words.” David asserted they’d “rather do a deep dive on a narrower subject than just skidder across the surface of some broader topic,” and that by working through an outline with the authors, David “can see whether they can cover everything they want to cover within that feature article format.” David further explained that “sometimes people honestly have way more ideas than their going to be able to fit into an article, and it helps to know that in advance so [they] can get them to pair down and try to become more focused.”

If David and the other editor decide the pitch passes the screens, David sends a template back to the writers to gather technical information in “an outline for 450 words.” David explained that once a pitch comes in, the length of the article is determined by how they classify it. The quality assurance department articles are on “shorter topics” “typically in the 1000 to say 2400 word range,” while the feature articles are more of a “deep dive” on “pretty complex subject matter” in the 4000 to 5000 word range.

According to David, they try to help their authors “shape the content to best fit [their] editorial goals.” He asserted that it’s his job on the “back end” to “form their content into the most efficient delivery system for readers,” by “polishing a little, polishing the structure, and on the shorter articles it’s easier cause you can’t go wrong very far cause you’re restrained on the word count.”

David said they rely on structure much more than style because on “95 or 99%” of their articles, the authors aren’t professional writers, so they “need to let the structure do as much of the work as possible.”

David asserted that in 10 years at *Solar Pro*, they’ve only taken a “handful” of finished articles, and instead, they prefer to work with “contributors from the very beginning so they’re shaping content in the ways that are most applicable” and “interesting” to their readers. The feature articles can be “a lot more complicated narratively,” so David likes to use a 450 word outline and work with the authors so David can see if “they can cover everything they want to cover within that feature article format... and it helps to know that in advance so [they] can get them to pair down and try to become more focused.” David said he likes to have a short introduction and “at least a paragraph in that introduction where it just sort of explains the layout of the content that’s going to follow, and the more efficiently it does that the better cause then we can just get to the content.”

David asserted that *Solar Pro* publishes a print magazine six times a year, as well as a website focused on solar industry news, analysis, in-depth feature articles, editorials, and project profiles.

### **John Parnell, Head of Content, *PV-Tech***

John works in a team of eight full-time staff members, and they all work together to decide which topics to write about. John and his team collect stories that they come across online into a shared Google document, and then “use a combination of email and Slack to discuss what we should and shouldn’t write.” He listed press releases (contributed as well as found elsewhere), newspaper reports, financial statements from companies, and sometimes content companies are planning on publishing later that day as sources for article ideas and topics.

John also said that they also look at stories from other publications for opportunities to build on trending topics. If they think they need a story on a certain topic that other publications are covering, he says they will wonder, “how can we move this story on and develop it into something fresh and a bit more original.”

John asserted that he “wouldn’t say that source matters that much in terms of selection,” but they “try not to publish anything wholesale from a PR source.” John said that, “if there’s anything in the press release that we think is questionable, we will hold off and make sure we get some information from the company before we run it.” According to John, they receive “a lot of very poor materials circulate by people in the industry directly” with “quite a lack of awareness when it comes to media relations in the industry.” They “occasionally will be asked to regurgitate this stuff,” and because there are “definitely a lot of very poor communication practitioners in the industry who don’t understand basic things like... the value of people from the company talking about industry issues rather than normally about the company and its products or services.” He said that “when it comes to story selection, there might be something to talk about there because the fact that these people are not always great at, for example, spotting a story, spotting an angle, means that we could for example get sent a press release that is extremely dull when you look at the subject line,” but buried in the press release, “they’ll casually tell you they’ve done something utterly fascinating, and you just bang your head on your desk and say, ‘Really? That’s what they led with?’” He says that dealing with “people in the industry who maybe don’t quite get the whole media relations issue... can complicate things,” as they “don’t do us any favors when it comes to finding stories, and yeah it perhaps softens or weakens their influence on what we write, because by and large they’re not great at it.” He attributes this partly to the industry being “quite a new industry,” where companies “can grow very fast and disappear very quickly.”

John also claimed that, “the way the website is structured also dictates what stories we choose.” He said they keep five top stories on the website that they “want to draw people’s attention to, and it’s important to us to keep them rotating and keep them moving.” As the editor, John says this “incentivizes you to make sure you’ve always got fresh, decent stories that are worth putting in those boxes, and it sometimes makes you think about when you need to ramp up your efforts with off-diary stories and exclusives and so on.” John went on to say that when the list is “full of just little short PR stories that need to be topped and tailed and sort of sanity checked, then it sometimes makes you go back to the drawing board and say come on, is anyone sitting on anything good we can speed up and get out today.” John admits that “it’s not a totally organic process because we do have these particular boxes to tick” in order to rotate website content so they don’t “look stale and out of touch.” He concluded that “it’s hard to say whether that is driving us to more news or whether it’s the other way around,” and that he thinks, “it probably varies.” John says that they “try to have a fairly even geographic spread as well, but it’s not something we’ll stick to religiously,” and that maintaining a consistent geographic spread of content is “not something that would force to sort of write stories that we might otherwise not really want to deal with.”

According to John, he puts “quite a heavy emphasis on exclusivity” with the content they publish in order to stand out from their competitors who might all be publishing articles with headlines “that are all poor imitations of another, cause they’ve all come from a press release or whatever.” John asserted that it’s the “longer form” articles that earn the reader’s trust, and that “you don’t win that trust from copying press releases or from always making sure you’re the first person to cover company results, or having the best analysis and so on.” “So it comes back to

exclusivity, unique angles, actually being useful to them in their job so that you're not just well designed, handsome site with a gimmicky name that happens to fill a bit of procrastination time, but you're actually providing them with information that's influencing how they work and how they make decisions," John said. John believes they have earned this trust from their readers because "they tell, because they then invest in our market research because they see us as a legitimate source," but "you can't just assume that it will remain for all time. You have to keep providing that, so yeah, I guess it's about being more than just a bulletin board, and actually being a useful resource."

In terms of shaping contributed content, John asserted that he "wouldn't say that source matters that much in terms of selection," but they "try not to publish anything wholesale from a PR source." Instead, "everything that goes out has been fact checked, rewritten," and usually they will "amputate some of the superlatives from a press release."

John asserted that he thinks structure is more important than style because he doesn't think "news reporters need to be especially good writers. If they can keep it simple and short and to the point, then that's one kind of skill." He described two kinds of writers as the sculptor versus the carpenter, where the "carpenter can bash out a beautiful 300 word, inverted pyramid story with no words with more than 4 syllables and anyone can read it and realize exactly what the point of it is," while, "the sculptor can go off and write a beautiful novel." He asserts that structure is more important because, "if you could take that artist and he or she could write us a news story with a terrible structure in beautiful prose and it would be awful, but I think if you don't have the structure then you're immediately putting barriers between the audience and the main objective of the story, and quality of writing can't really rescue that."

In terms of using freelance writers, John said they "don't freelance online stuff very often at all, largely because it's not a very resource efficient way of dealing with news, but in print we definitely do use freelancers."

John made it clear that the content differs for their website versus their printed publication, and they mainly freelancers in their print publication. He said they also publish guest blogs and internal blogs as well as "volume news." John further asserted that "although volume wise we're writing a lot more news, if you looked at the average success of a story, so thinking about not just hits but also engagement, longevity, and all those kinds of things, the blogs definitely win. But in terms of the amount of time that are put into them... the reward versus effort wise, it's hard to compare, but I would say that it's a lot easier to do volume news and get the same level of engagement as you would from sitting down and putting that time into writing a really good blog just because it can be so hard to predict what kind of reception it will get."

### **Julia Pyper, Senior Editor, *Greentech Media***

*Greentech Media* uses "journalists and a global network of expert contributors, supported by a team of analysts from our market intelligence arm, GTM Research" to deliver "market analysis, business-to-business news and conferences that inform and connect players in the global clean energy market."

In terms of where she finds article ideas, Julia explained that her team of five "collect news items we see either in press releases or social media or directly from sources, and we have everyone to do several quick news stories a week – super-fast reacting ones – while also working on more longer-term ones. We're constantly assigning stories for our full-time staff and also managing a suite of freelancers, so we're editing and taking in content from all of them."

Julia explained that she's a "part of a ton of listervs" and also makes sure she's "reading other news stories out there." She said this involves other news sites, a "myriad of listserves," and "a ton of press releases coming in." She explained some press releases "come from industry, some are press releases from political offices" and, "press releases are a whole different way of getting news within that realm." She also mentioned word of mouth at conferences, meeting with solar companies in person, and ideas submitted by freelancers as sources for article ideas and topics. She asserted they "cover reports on a lot of things which kind of fall into the press releases as a category at large," and that when a report comes out, they'll "dive" into it further and "get some other experts to weigh in on it."

She also mentioned that they do "accept some contributor articles" and crosslink directly from other sites. "If it's something we did not break but it's really noteworthy, yeah we'll reference another news article and make sure we cite it correctly, and it's prominent but sometimes you have to key off the reporting." She further explained that, in general, they want to work with contributors who interview their "own sources or at least have them weigh in on it or access data" so they're "not just replicating something."

According to Julia, herself and the editor-in-chief also "write full time as well... finding our own stories, writing them, editing, etc." *Greentech Media* is a "interesting model" according to Julia because they "have a research team and we coordinate with them and they will serve us sources in our stories but we are independent. We're not informed by what they do and they have their own contacts as well so it's sort of complementary."

Julia asserted that her gut reaction is the "predominant" way she decides between topics because as an editor. "You know you just kind of know. It's very closely tied to number 2 of knowing your audience, and looking at comments, looking at traffic, having it inform what you do going forward. Certainly anything new that involves someone notable, and we just kind of get that journalism tingly sense, and you follow that. I think it's also that a lot of journalists want to drive the conversation and finding new things, not every story is a super win but you may just cover something cause you think it's important, and sometimes you're right on like oh, I never thought of that before and it gets a lot of traction. So I do think there's a lot of new sense involved, and again is very closely tied to number 2, knowing who you're writing for."

In terms of shaping and assigning to writers, Julia said that part of her role is "is searching for news, assigning it to other people, and then actually editing it and maybe restructuring it, coming up with headlines and adding in any SEO elements that need to be added, following up with social media presence and making sure our stories get out there."

Julia explained in terms of shaping, she thinks "the structure is essential and the style is desired." "So if it's poorly structured, people will not be able to follow and will quickly turn away. So I think style is important as well, but I mean the news wire don't necessarily have style, they just give information, and I think the structure is essential and the style is desired." However, she did mention that "you can bury the lead as people call it, and if you do that people might not get passed the first couple paragraphs to the real meat of the story."

*Greentech Media* publishes a large variety of content that includes news, feature articles, press releases, editorials, blogs, podcasts, videos, webinars, white papers, analysis, and project profiles among other offerings. Julia pointed out that being online only and interacting with social media influences the way they present information to their readers. She asserted that through social media interaction, they "try to find new and different ways of talking about clean energy in addition to writing day-to-day news."

## **RQ2 - Article Conceptualization**

What do editors understand about the value and role of narrative and storytelling? In particular, what is the relation between an article's importance versus its interestingness?

### **Jennifer Runyon, Editor-in-Chief, *Renewable Energy World***

In regards to the value of narrative, Jennifer said that "a straight news story is great for facts but it doesn't always tell the whole story, all the contacts, and at least with something like energy there's always a bigger story because it's an industry you know that's affected by policy in addition to technology, so it's all the pieces." She said that "there's a lot going on in the background that people may not know about," and thinks "it's important to tell those stories."

Jennifer explained that between importance and interestingness, their content "has to have both." "I mean so we are business to business publication, that's our bottom line, so we are always trying to give readers something they can use in their job or their business, something that is useful, for sure. Yeah, we're absolutely trying to do that, so that's key, but you have to make it sound interesting too or they're not going to read it," she said.

When she receives an article from a contributor or freelance writer, she thinks it's more valuable in the form of a narrative "if it's well done, absolutely, but it can be done badly. And then it doesn't work at all." She avoids narratives when the end goal is a "really thinly veiled attempt at selling a product," and explains those stories don't work because they're "way too promotional."

### **Kathie Zipp, Managing Editor, *Solar Power World***

In regards to the value of narrative, Kathie explained that they use a "project case study" in every issue, and thinks "people really like those real-life examples and they kind of want to learn the story through the process." She thinks that "it's beneficial to walk the reader through that process so they can learn from mistakes or different challenges that those people experienced in the beginning, middle, or the end," and "maybe appeals to the human side of the reader." Company profiles, called Contractor's Corner, were also mentioned as involving a narrative structure that tells the story of "where the company came from and how they got to where they are."

"They want to learn through the process, because especially with a solar installation or project, there is a beginning, middle, and end, so I think it's beneficial to walk the reader through that process so they can learn from mistakes or a different challenges that those people experienced in the beginning, middle, or the end."

She thinks the use of narrative makes the content more engaging, but also prioritizes providing "a variety of different approaches to articles to really satisfy the reader." She thinks of narratives as being a bit longer, but knows that's not always true, and since the reader won't always have the time to read a longer piece, it's important to give them options through the article type and the medium. The content and style for each medium, such as webinars, podcasts, videos, print articles, or online articles varies. "I think it all goes back to providing different types of stories, different lengths, different tones, different approaches, to engage the reader."

Kathie explained that between importance and interestingness, the information is most important but the content needs to have both, and there lies a challenge. "So we want it to be interesting, engaging, even fun sometimes and it's not an easy job, especially when you're talking about technical, dry information, but I think that a good writer can take that and really make it more engaging."



She reiterated that, “you want the information to be clear and you want it to be engaging, but you don’t want it to be so wordy... that the information gets lost.” “No matter what style you use, or structure, you just want to make sure at the end that you know, the information is displayed in a clear way,” she said.

Since her team doesn’t employ anyone with a technical background and the solar industry audience has a wide variance of experience, they focus on making the information easy to understand, so “that if you show it to somebody outside the solar industry they should still be able to have a good idea of what’s going without a very extensive background in solar.” “You want the information to be clear and you want it be engaging, but you don’t want it to be so wordy, or anything like that, so that the information gets lost.”

She also credited the magazine’s design creativity and images as making it more enjoyable for the reader, standing out in comparison to competitors’ magazines at trade shows.

### **Chris Crowell, Managing Editor, *Solar Builder***

In order to attract readers and separate his magazine from his competitors, since they’re all “covering the same stuff,” Chris uses narrative “quite often,” and tries to “[maintain] a voice” while being “as personable as possible.” He thinks narratives “[draw] the reader in a little bit more,” and wants to make his content “feel different, [and] more readable” than his competitors so “readers feel like they’re a part of [a] club.” He believes his audience “like hearing about stories of their peers,” and “how maybe they’ve done something,” and thinks “there’s just not as much value in doing an inverted pyramid style story I think for the topics I’m trying to dive into.”

In terms of an article’s importance versus it’s interestingness, Chris balances the two by thinking of them as “two big buckets of content.” He has “the real news” on one side “which is maybe not as much about the interesting way that I chose to write it, but more about trying to get to the main bullet points... to get the facts right and get and get it out there make sure everyone understand what’s happening.” On the other side, if it’s a “best practices type of feature” or “something dry like something you might skip over,” “that’s when [he’ll] try to make interesting analogies or just try to be fun with the headline, or maybe draw someone in, to make it clever or just a more fun way to maybe talk about something that you’d potentially just skip past.” Christ lets “the topic kind of guide [him] which direction makes sense,” and doesn’t “want to downgrade a news story by you know, trying to be too cute with it.”

Chris thinks articles that use narrative “definitely can be” more engaging for the reader, but that it depends on the medium, subject, and setting. If he’s browsing on “Slate” (a news broadcast site?), and the topic is something he’s “interested in real quick,” it can be “annoying” when it’s in longer form and makes him read more than a couple paragraphs to get the information he want. Therefore, he wouldn’t say a narrative necessarily makes an article more valuable to him.

### **John Howell, Editorial Director, *Just Means***

John asserts that *Just Means* has many different kinds of writers, and that “some” writers prefer writing stories with “more journalism in them” and “more storytelling... on a particular beat.” These articles can be over 800 words, with over a thousand words being classified as a feature article. At the same time, because *Just Means* is “publishing quite a few stories everyday” that are shorter in length, around 400 words, and the audience is “already self-

selected” for wanting this type of information, “there’s no more room for storytelling” after the facts are presented in these shorter articles.

As an editor, John asserts that he “often [feels]” that he “[loses] points on the narrative storytelling aspect of things,” and has “all sorts of twinges of trying to make things more engaging up front, a little more colorful.” He describes narrative as being in “a constant war with the volume of data that goes into one of [their] stories.” In general, John asserts he places a greater emphasis on importance versus interestingness for two of the three article types he publishes, and describes *Just Means* as “very information driven” and further asserts that “information can be a real threat to narrative.”

Although John describes himself as a “narrative-first, narrative fan” who is “always very curious how people would manage to incorporate more storytelling, more narrative elements and vary integration in very fact-heavy, data-heavy content,” he feels “incredibly pressured the other way on websites.” On websites, John assumes “people’s attention span is short, their attention span within a website is short, their attention span for multiple formats and types and boxes of categories of content is short.” He asserts that he feels like he’s going against his “nature somewhat by constantly shorting the narrative aspects and saying, ‘cram the facts in.’” If it was up to him “more people would read more at length, and a little more slowly, and [he’d] put a little more narrative, a little more storytelling into these stories.”

According to John, general readers scanning who are curiously scanning “major sites” for renewable energy news but aren’t working in the renewable energy field directly, will “want to know what’s going on it” and will “want a story.” For this reason, John asserts that there’s “nothing wrong with a press release, it’s just not enough by default anymore to do one, because they get used by certain people.” While John asserts that his readers are in general “self-selected” and that *Just Means* doesn’t need to “compete” with other publications on writing style like mainstream news, by including various article formats of narrative stories as well as press releases and general news, *Just Means* is able to appeal to a “very mixed audience” and attract more readers.

### **Anne Fischer, Managing Editor, *Solar Novus Today***

Although Anne thinks the narrative form is “probably of greater interest” from “the reader’s point of view,” she asserts that her trade publication is “pretty technical” and doesn’t often write in narrative style. Case studies, like the one use in the reference example, is “probably the closest” examples of narratives she thinks they publish. Anne asserts that her readers “love” those narrative case studies since they are “interested in different uses of solar,” “even if they don’t make that kind of solar or are not going to buy that or install that.” She thinks readers in general probably enjoy the narrative style “no matter what you’re covering,” so “it’s good to offer” that style, but the amount of use “depends on the publication.” She further asserts that using the narrative style “breaks up some of the more technical stuff,” and giving “the reader a variety of styles in the same publication makes it a lot more approachable.”

However, Anne asserts “the importance of the information is more important” than the interestingness of the content, since the audience for trade publications read them “because it’s what they do for a living... not where they go for entertainment.” “So it is important for things to be interesting, but you know not entertaining,” Ann says. Anne asserts that important information “can also be presented in such a way that it’s interesting,” and “that’s always the goal.”

Narratives are “definitely more rare in technical publications or trade publications,” but “are of more interest” and are “better read by readers just because they appeal to a broader cross-section of readers.” She confirms that case studies are the main channel for narratives at her publication, but they do publish business features in a narrative style “once in a while.”

**Carly Rixham, Editor/Art Editor/Publisher, *Solar Today***

Carly asserts that “culturally we connect to narrative” because, “it’s something that we can relate to,” but also that “some people like reading narratives and some people like reading more of an argumentative style approach.” She asserts that “narrative can be very engaging and captivating” but that calling it “storytelling” in their “fact-based news” “might give the impression there might some fiction involved.”

She further asserts that “the reader might be more relaxed, and open, and receptive” when reading a narrative, but it “depends on what the interests of the reader are” and the reader’s “mood.” According to Carly, *Solar Today*’s readers are “a combination of solar professionals and solar enthusiasts,” and the print magazine takes “more of a coffee-table magazine that is inspiring to people,” so “the narrative approach is important to include.”

For Carly, the “information and the content” and “the topic” are what’s most important, “and that has to be paramount.” If content is “not appropriate or not applicable” or not “the right topic, then it’s not going to be published.” But if the content and topic are appropriate, “then in addition to that it’s also important that it’s written in an interesting fashion.”

Narratives are more valuable than other kinds of articles for Carly because the content their regular contributors submit are “more argumentative style” so they “have that covered” in general. Feature articles are looked at as opportunities for “more narrative,” and she publishes around three feature articles” per magazine that tie into a particular theme, “whether its storage or policy or jobs or new products or materials.”

**Trevor Galbraith, Content Manager/Editor, *Global Solar and Alternative Energies***

In terms of the value an article has, Trevor thinks, “obviously it holds more value if it’s in a narrative form,” but that it can become “very bland and you need to hold the reader,” so he thinks “it’s also important to have some imagery in there.” He further stated “it’s nice if it’s a full article... to have data supporting the argument you’re making.”

Trevor thought the narrative reference article was a good example of narrative and “an interesting story because it shows another application for the use of solar” that “some of [their] manufacturing customers might want to explore.” **David Brearley, Senior Technical Editor, *Solar Pro***

David asserted that narratives are more valuable than other articles forms, and that it’s “sort of implicit in everything” they publish, and base it off a “bunch of articles that are exploring content.” David thought the Project Profiles are a good example of their narrative use, and follow a template for contributors. According to David, *Solar Pro* “really just want to be generating content that’s constantly useful and valuable, and often more narrative driven, and even when you’re just looking at content as a way of marketing vehicles, the best marketing vehicles is the stuff that doesn’t look like marketing material.”

David asserted that they’re “not trying to be the first to market with information, like all kinds of news aggregators do that very well.” Instead, David said they’re “really developing high level original content for a pretty narrowly defined audience.... So that utility of that information is paramount.” He asserted that *Solar Pro* content “is really looking to have the longest shelf

life,” and is “designed” that way from a “hard copy mentality.” He said it can be “a little tricky” when “information ceases to be relevant or accurate just because the market pivoted and went 90 degrees from where it had been, or code changes, all the technical content was accurate for 2008 national electrical code, and then it’s just not going to be relevant, it could be inaccurate or code records could be inaccurate under the subsequent code addition.”

David said that he hopes narratives are more engaging to readers, because although the topics are “dense” and he thinks “people are going to them on an as-needed basis,” David and his team “spend a lot of time trying to make the articles read as easily and as engaging as possible with a reasonably high level of literacy and occasional moments of humor.”

### **John Parnell, Head of Content, *PV-Tech***

Narratives are more valuable to John than other article forms because “it’s not just the fact it’s a narrative, it’s the fact that it’s exclusive and other sources of news immediately disown any possible chance of exclusivity.” John made it clear that press releases, public speeches, and content that “comes off the news wires,” are “not exclusive” because “so many people will ripped it off legally or not legally.” He went on to say that social media makes it “hard to be the gatekeeper of an exclusive story” because “social media allows lots of people who don’t read your site to spread it,” and “it can be “very difficult... to know whether they got that from us or their own work, unless it’s blatantly plagiarized.” With narratives like the narrative reference example, “it’s utterly unique,” and, “no one would try to rip us off because it would be so obvious.” John thinks narrative gives the article a “shelf life” and hopes “that when readers see things like this, they realize that we’re not a content factory churning out as much volume as possible. We are engaging with the industry and trying to tell them things they don’t know.”

Narratives are also more valuable to John because they earn the trust of readers for the long-term. John asserted that it’s the “longer form” articles that earn the reader’s trust, like the narrative reference example, and that “you don’t win that trust from copying press releases or from always making sure you’re the first person to cover company results, or having the best analysis and so on.” “So it comes back to exclusivity, unique angles, actually being useful to them in their job so that you’re not just well designed, handsome site with a gimmicky name that happens to fill a bit of procrastination time, but you’re actually providing them with information that’s influencing how they work and how they make decisions,” John said. John believes they have earned this trust from their readers because “they tell, because they then invest in our market research because they see us as a legitimate source,” but “you can’t just assume that it will remain for all time. You have to keep providing that, so yeah, I guess it’s about being more than just a bulletin board, and actually being a useful resource.”

In terms of an article’s importance versus interestingness, John thinks they don’t actively “seek out in an attempt to have a bit of both,” and that they “might have days where every story is more about information,” and other days “where two or three are interesting.” John thinks they’re “ultimately a news source for professionals writing about their profession, and if we dip too far into some of the lighter stuff, we would be concerned that would then impact our reputation, but at the same time... just because people are reading about their work doesn’t mean that it has to feel like work.” Instead, John says there “are things you can do to make any story interesting and accessible, even if ultimately the overall goal is by and large information in one way or another.”

John said that for the newsletter in particular, they “do make an effort to have a bit of variety in the type of news that’s there, but in terms of information versus interesting, I think we have to be aware of the purpose of why people are on this site without deliberately setting out to make it as dry and dull as possible. There’s some middle ground there, and that’s the kind of sweet spot we aim for.”

John thinks the use of narrative affects how the readers receive the ideas involved in an article, and described how a recent topic on international trade laws is dividing their international audience from different viewpoints, and choosing which side to represent with a narrative influences the audience’s reaction to the news. He further stated that narrative is needed for variety with “constantly developing” stories like this, “because if you just went for inverted pyramid every time, the bottom third of the pyramid would basically become the same 3 paragraphs.” John said that “you have to kind of think a little more about how you’re structuring things” when presenting a polarizing topic like trade policy. “All of the rules have to apply in terms of neutrality and all the rest of it, but it becomes a case of us being hypersensitive about how we present things, and having to be very aware that our readers are extremely divided on this particular issue,” John said.

In terms of whether narratives are more engaging than argumentative articles, John said that he thinks “it varies... because that’s what we see from our analytics.” He described how it can be difficult to anticipate which articles will be popular, and that it’s “unfair to compare a guest blog from say someone very respected in the industry that is only going to write for us twice in a year, if that, versus the routine churn of news.” While long-form narratives may earn the reader’s trust and have a shelf life, John asserted that “reward versus effort wise, it’s hard to compare, but I would say that it’s a lot easier to do volume news and get the same level of engagement as you would from sitting down and putting that time into writing a really good blog just because it can be so hard to predict what kind of reception it will get.”

### **Julia Pyper, Senior Editor, *Greentech Media***

Julia asserted that she thinks of narrative storytelling as having “more of a personal element involved,” and, “that’s kind of hard to always have it apply in the space that we cover.” “Yeah I mean the official definition says there’s more of a personal element involved and that’s kind of what I think of a narrative storytelling too. That’s kind of a hard to always have it apply in the space that we cover.” She further stated that “in business-to-business journalism, in a technology sector, I think there’s limited applications for narrative where they can be effective, but I don’t think it’s always the most effective

However, she did mention that they had recently published a contributed story from a “military member” that “definitely has narrative elements” which “definitely gives the author in that scenario credibility, telling a bit of his story, and it’s informing the actual data and the news element of it.”

In terms of engagement, Julia said narratives “can be effective when applied in the right scenario.” When asked if narratives are potentially more engaging for the reader, Julia responded, “Yeah, I mean again I have to caveat it – it depends on what state of mind your reader has when they come to your site, and they come to different sites for different things. So I think if you try to force a narrative on someone who comes to our B2B business site for straight news, you may not get much traction.”

Julia said she thinks narratives can be engaging because “people like stories,” and, “it’s the way humans have communicated for centuries.” “I think language and imagery, and you

know if it resonates with someone, they can imagine that they can put themselves in that scenario, if they are enjoying what they're reading, certainly that can help the content stick with them I think. There's so much information battling for people's brains right now, something resonates and that comes there because there may be a way that that happened."

In regards to article importance and interestingness, she said she "definitely" thinks about it. "I think, today in our world it seems like importance is what prevails even though we're in a specific category story of news being clean tech and clean energy, there's still tons of news so we're trying to you know, triage a little a bit and think about a particularly clever way of presenting something, something that's pretty straight news. That said, it can be really effective if you have a nice analogy or something that really drives home a concept, especially when we're writing more technical pieces. Keeping that voice, even when you're talking about something as complicated as utility rate-making and weird technologies. I think that's definitely the mark of a good writer. Someone who can bring some maybe common turns of phrase or imagery into a technical story. So importance versus style, definitely think about. We don't always have the luxury I guess of thinking about style. Sometimes you just have to deliver the information quickly."

### **RQ3 - Importance of Message Characteristics**

What types of information lends itself to narrative form? When is the use of narrative elements appropriate for news articles?

#### **Jennifer Runyon, Editor-in-Chief, *Renewable Energy World***

Jennifer thinks narratives are "definitely" more engaging than other article forms, with the caveat that she has limited time "and sometimes just need to know what the news is." She personally thinks of a narrative as a longer article, but knows "that's not necessarily true."

#### **Kathie Zipp, Managing Editor, *Solar Power World***

When submitted content involves a process, or has a beginning, middle, and end structure to it, Kathie considers if it "makes a good narrative," and should be shaped into a narrative structure. Whereas if the content is more, "here's this technology, this is how it works, that might not be the best in [narrative] format."

Kathie and her team publish a Contractor's Corner every month as a podcast as well as an article "so that people can learn from their peers and that really appeals to them. They can see how other people are running their businesses and their projects." The reference article turned out to be a Contractor's Corner, and Kathie thought it was a good example of narrative because it's "telling the story of a company," and uses quotes to support the story. She loosely described the narrative structure for Contractor's Corner articles as initially giving a glimpse of "what the company is and where they are, and then it usually follows this structure where it goes back after that into their beginning," eventually ending with where they're "going in the future."

#### **Chris Crowell, Managing Editor, *Solar Builder***

When asked about the narrative style versus the argumentative style, Chris suggested that the use depends on "the medium and the topic" that the readers are "digesting it in." Chris suggests the reader's expectation of the article form is determined by the headline, the topic, and the medium.

Each form “might both serve just their purpose in trying to best utilize a specific medium.” The use of narrative “makes sense” to him when the medium is in print, because readers like himself are more likely to sit down and invest “for the long haul a little bit more” when the medium is printed. Whereas argumentative style “could be more chunky and subheaded, and maybe quick hitting so you can kind of scan through a little bit more and just like pick up points here and there.”

According to Chris, the reader’s expectation of the article form is influenced by the medium, the headline, and the topic, and can be annoyed when expectation’s are not met. For example, he is personally disappointed when he clicks on a headline and expects the information to be delivered quickly, but instead the article is in a longer form. When he wants to see something “real quick” online, he doesn’t want to have to read a “whole journey” to get the information.

In terms of style or structure, Chris asserts he’s “more about style” as a writer and a reader, as style tends to draw him into an article, with structure as a guideline for delivering key information. Chris focuses on writing “interesting, creative copy” where a voice is established early so that the reader can feel they’re on the “same page” with the writer, “or intrigued” to read more within “those first couple lines.” At the same time, Chris asserts that it’s “counterproductive” for the writer to bury key information in an article by using too much space for style or “creativity.”

Chris classifies the narrative reference article as “general news” and thought it wasn’t “the best narrative,” but that “it does support that structure a little bit” as it “tries to tell the story of Chicago after you get the initial new hit as to... how it developed.” He asserts that there “wasn’t really anything exclusive about this” article, “it’s just something kind of happened I picked up and posted online.”

According to Chris, one of the “big focuses of Solar Builder in particular is... trying to talk about new technology and products,” and when he hears something totally new as a reader, like “if someone claims this is the all-in-one turn-key energy storage system, it does everything differently,” he instantly thinks “well, walk me through this.” He asserts a case study is appropriate for new products as it can put the product in context for the readers.

“So I always I think try to follow up and tell any sort of innovation story in a narrative way cause I want to relate it to that day-to-day job, you know, of how, what is it making simpler? What part of the process? Is it just the beginning part? Is it at the end of this, it generated more electricity. If it did, why did it?”

As an example, Chris asserts he received positive feedback from a company in the past by shaping their “technical content” about a new design process into a narrative structure that tells the story of their design, “from the cell level all the way to the inverter and everything.” He suggests narrative “can be the better way of relaying technical content,” and that the company was excited by the way he had told the story and made the technical design process “sound interesting.”

### **John Howell, Editorial Director, *Just Means***

John asserts that narrative elements are more appropriate for longer form, personal opinion articles that some of his writers like to do on topics they’re passionate about, than for the general news articles they publish. He feels constantly “pressured to keep things curse, and tight, and brief,” because he believes his readers are “moving fast.” He worries that the more

storytelling, the more “journalistic flair and color” he puts into the articles, the slower his audience will read, but in turn, he thinks he’ll “end up with fewer readers.”

“So I don’t think I’m working under a fall assumption here, but I’ll tell you it rubs me a little bit the wrong way to sacrifice storytelling, [to] sacrifice elements of storytelling and narrative things that I like to read and see for data and information, but I think that’s, I’m probably making the right choice here. Even if I don’t always like it.”

According to John, when he’s writing his own piece, sometimes he will go back after inserting the data and have to “take out all the narrative, transitions, all the journalism color, the metaphors” because he’s still “20 words over.” His assumption is that in the end, *Just Means* readers in general are going to care less about his “personal flair with journalism and [his] colorful southern metaphors” if he just gives them important data.

### **Anne Fischer, Managing Editor, *Solar Novus Today***

Anne asserts only case studies and the occasional “business feature” are published in a narrative form. Anne thinks the case study selected as a narrative reference example was a good example of narrative and asserts that it was directly submitted from the company, and was then accepted for publishing because Anne and her team thought it was “very objective,” and not “very marketing oriented where they were saying it was the greatest thing.”

In general, Anne asserts that the “facts and the research behind the article” are the most important aspects to her, since “if everything’s there that’s needed... everything else can be put into place by a good editor.”

### **Carly Rixham, Editor/Art Editor/Publisher, *Solar Today***

Carly thinks the narrative reference example was a good example of narrative and labels that “type of article a success story.” She thought the images used in the print magazine version were “really good and helps to paint the picture of six different types of installations,” and that the “feel good type of conclusion” “brings it home.”

Carly says that “while narrative is enjoyable and entertaining, for [their] editorial style, we can be turned off too much drama. And so, it has to be in the appropriate type of style and delivery so that it’s not overdramatized.” So narratives that are overdramatic may be flagged and reworked, or not published. Overall, she tries “to keep it more balanced,” since they “prefer content that brings in technical information,” for their “sophisticated, educated audience of solar professionals and enthusiasts... thirsty for facts and advances in the industry, so that reading the article is a valuable use of their time.” She asserts that “things like case studies and new research and trials and statistical evidence [are] important to include.”

In terms of writing style vs article structure, Carly thinks writing style “might be more low-hanging fruit in that if a writing style is off-putting or totally engaging on the other hand, that can be noticeable, right away.” Article structure on the other hand, “could be a little bit more subtle” since “readers have such a short attention span that if you know they’re not totally engaged with the entire structure of the article they’re still going to get the jist of it and get what they want out of it.” In summary, the writing style comes first to engage the reader, “unless the writing style is challenging or inappropriate.”

### **Trevor Galbraith, Content Manager/Editor, *Global Solar and Alternative Energies***

Trevor asserted that narratives work well when they show new applications of solar technology that the reader “might want to explore.” He further stated that it helps to support



narratives in a full in-depth article with images and data. For this reason, they do not limit the length of their articles.

### **David Brearley, Senior Technical Editor, *Solar Pro***

David made it clear that the feature articles and the Project Profiles are the most common types of content they publish that use narrative. He asserted that the value of narrative is “sort of implicit in everything [they] do,” as they try to generate “high level original content for a pretty narrowly defined audience,” that’s “constantly useful and valuable, and often more narrative driven.”

According to David, the feature articles run between the 4000 to 6000 word range and in contrast to the quality assurance department articles in the 1000 to 1400 word range, feature articles can be “a lot more complicated narratively.” He further stated that some of their articles “have more complex narrative structures than others, and the ones that have more complex narrative structures,” he thinks “are the most challenging... for everyone, because [they’re] doing relatively long articles for a trade publication, and pretty complex subject matter, so it kind of helps to make sure that everything is being stated as clearly as possible.” He said they have “nice transitions from one part of the article to the next, and... that all takes a lot of work, and [they] dedicate a lot of resource to make that happen.”

David asserted that coming from a “hard-print mentality,” they’re “not trying to be first to market with information,” but instead are aiming to produce content with the “longest shelf life.” In order to do this, David asserted they’d “rather do a deep dive on a narrower subject than just skidder across the surface of some broader topic. According to David, one of their contributors “described it as very frustrating for readers if you’re presenting a problem but you don’t have enough room in the article to present the solution,” so *Solar Pro* is “a little more interested in present the problem, dive into the solution, and not leave people hanging wanting more.”

According to David, “even when you’re just looking at content as a way of marketing vehicles, the best marketing vehicles is the stuff that doesn’t look like marketing material.” He further asserted that “readers are pretty sophisticated” and that he personally tunes out “anything that comes across as kind of like a sales pitch.” Instead, he says he looks for content that relates to activities he’s engaged with “on a day-to-day basis, and certainly stuff that solves problems,” and thinks “the narrative structure can be more engaging that way” since it’s “kind of reading less like a press release or something.”

David asserted *Solar Pro* doesn’t publish advertorial content, and instead actively “direct” and “encourage” advertisers to use Project Profiles to establish their company as “opinion thought leaders” that “leave the sales pitch at the door.” He said “Project Profiles are actually one way that’s relatively simple for an advertiser to get some sway.” They tell advertisers, “if this product is everything you say it is, then why can’t you connect this with something who’s installing the product and solving problems for them and we’ll put it down to a Project Profile.” David asserted that companies submitting pitches for Project Profiles must go through several screens, and “always work directly with the system integrators and the system designers,” to get the “great technical content.”

David asserted the project profiles are “self-populating,” “really driven by readers,” and are “typically booked a couple issues in advance.” People and companies will submit content through a template that tries “to capture a lot of that technical information” with “some high resolution images and a little bit of a backstory on the project or high-level overview of

equipment.” He thought the narrative reference example follows “more of a potentially inverted-pyramid-type structure” that “starts off with who, what, when, where, and then we maybe get a little bit more of a narrative after that.” In general, David said the projects they “profile are maybe the biggest, the best,” but this one in particular “is just a tiny little project but it’s sort of high profile,” “which is one of the things that made it interesting” and “very unique.”

As far as specific narrative elements, David asserted that he hopes the narrative style is more engaging for readers, because they “spend a lot of time trying to make the articles read as easily and as engaging as possible with a reasonably high level of literacy and occasional moments of humor.” David also asserted that because they rarely work with professional writers and opt instead for “industry professionals” and “subject-matter experts,” he thinks they “need to let the structure do as much of the work as possible.” David said that because most of their writers “don’t have a lot of sophisticated skills in terms of how they present their content,” he tries to “form their content into the most efficient delivery system for readers, and it’s polishing a little it, polishing the structure.”

### **John Parnell, Head of Content, *PV-Tech***

John asserted that ongoing topics that they have to write several stories about benefit from narrative because they provide variety to the inverted-pyramid format. John thought the narrative reference example was an effective use of narrative partly because it showed how problems are being overcome in an emerging market. John asserted that “obviously what people want to see is ideas about how these [problems] are being overcome,” and “want to know what’s happening from people on the ground,” and, “that adds an awful lot of value.” John further stated “the ability to localize this was a big factor to the scale and scope of coverage that it has and I think ultimately the impact and legitimacy of the piece.”

By balancing a personal narrative with the market information, John thought his in-house staff writer did a good job of “keeping it interesting and introducing lots of personalities but not losing sight of the fact that the overall goal of this piece was to give people information on quite a large market, a diverse market.” He thought the writer did a good job of getting “these people presenting the problems and the solutions largely in their own words, and when required to, he’s paraphrased.” “There is some narrative with the people who are in it, telling their own story but I think Tom’s kept in mind that the objective is to inform,” John said.

According to John, the narrative reference example was a “longer piece” and “an opportunity really because Tom was able to get access to people we would struggle to speak on the phone from an office in London.” In other words, by sending their in-house staff writer to Africa to interview people first-hand on how they’re overcoming problems in the emerging market, the article retrieved useful information that couldn’t have been procured over the phone, and therefore the article’s value increased because of increased exclusivity, usefulness, and shelf life.

### **Julia Pyper, Senior Editor, *Greentech Media***

Julia asserted that narrative’s “can be effective” but “usually those stories are longer.” “Yeah, I think it can be effective, and usually those stories are longer, so I think the challenge with that is how do you have content that someone is going to settle into and read to the end? The reason why we tell them to put all the important information up top and the rest is there if you want it.” She further asserted that, “it’s a big challenge of today’s new world, figuring out

how to keep people's eyeballs on a website." "So if you can keep your narrative concise and short, it could potentially be consumed more or be more effective," she said.

According to Julia, they'd "love to write more narrative but really the problem with today's news, especially in B2B is people often want the information quickly, up front, you know you're seeing more and more of these articles actually bullet points at the very top of the story, before even getting into it." "So while it can be really effective if you have a subject that people want to delve into and hear some anecdotes around, I think that for what we do, we don't really have to tell it in the news format. We put those types of articles in a different layout on our sites to cue the reader that this is a different type of news story," she explained. She cautioned mixing narratives with "quick hit" news articles online because "people get caught off guard and their responses aren't as good." She said that their readers are "there to get the information," and that "it's harder to sell those kinds of narrative stories, as much fun as they may be to write, as effective as they may be in other scenarios." She listed The New Yorker as a publication where "people go there for narrative storytelling and come into it in the right frame of mind and it's very effective."

Julia also mentioned that it's "interesting how not only the publication dictates, and the readers dictate whether a narrative is successful, but the medium does too." In particular, she said that, "people have a different expectation with podcasts and they're willing to listen and follow along." She said they see this firsthand with their podcast The Energy Gang, because, "when they tell personal stories or they walk you through something, they have a different, more conversational way of approaching news and it's a different medium obviously, that does really well."

According to Julia, "PR professionals need to be aware of all the news stories types, and pitch all of them," because, "there is space for all of it, and I think the more that contributing people know the different story types at all is a good thing. But if you are the New Yorker, it's a different story. You know people go there for narrative storytelling and come into it in the right frame of mind and it's very effective. I know I'm not giving you an easy answer but I think it depends."

#### **RQ4 - Preference in Persuasion**

When dealing with persuasive content, do trade editors prefer narrative to argumentative style? In particular, what are their perceptions about narrative in relation to argumentative style?

##### **Jennifer Runyon, Editor-in-Chief, *Renewable Energy World***

Jennifer thinks narratives are more persuasive than other forms because "if you're making a point, you've gotta engage the reader. You've gotta make them apply to their own life, or something that they know, and you know, storytelling is the way to do that. From when people are children, you're telling stories and that's what engages you. For most people, not for all."

When asked if there were certain aspects of narrative that were particularly persuasive, she wasn't sure she had a good answer.

##### **Kathie Zipp, Managing Editor, *Solar Power World***

Kathie confirmed that she thinks the article form, narrative versus argumentative in particular, can affect the reader's opinion on the underlying issues. She described narrative

articles in general as longer and having a distinct tone, and that it's important for the tone to be relatable while remaining unbiased. "It's up to the writers [to] make sure that that tone is relatable, and that tone can influence the readers opinion and you still want to keep it unbiased," she said. "But at the same time I think having different flow and maybe a longer article can help the reader understand a little bit more, rather than just displaying the facts."

Therefore, Kathie attributes the persuasive influence of narratives to the writer's tone as well as through learning facilitation, describing a potential deeper understanding for readers, resulting from longer article length and article flow. She also mentions the journalistic importance of remaining unbiased, which highlights the multifaceted position trade publications are in as they compete for reader attention while promoting contributed content from organizations within the industry.

Kathie also pointed to the number and variability of perspectives, opinions, backgrounds, and sources an article uses as a factor for persuasion. She expressed that besides letters to the editor at the beginning of the magazine, most of the stories they write aren't in first person or have the writer's personal opinion. She stated "a good article has at least a couple sources... not in the same geographic area or exactly the same part of the industry so you're getting a couple different perspectives." Her publication tries to cover multiple sides to every story, uses 3<sup>rd</sup>-party sources for "unbiased facts or opinion" whenever possible, and sees the variety of view points as a kind of validity check for providing a bias-free story.

### **Chris Crowell, Managing Editor, *Solar Builder***

Chris asserts that he doesn't know if the article format affects readers' perception by itself, and doesn't think about it that way. Instead, he thinks that the article form serves a purpose "in trying to best utilize a specific medium." Chris is cautious to say narrative or argumentative is "100% - this is going to draw the reader in more or convince them more or be more pleasing to them as much as it's partly the medium and the topic that they're digesting it in."

According to Chris, narratives can be more persuasive than argumentative "cause it can cause it can feel maybe less like there's an agenda behind it, there's maybe a little more thought relaying it, or you know its just a little bit less of a in-your-face concept." He asserts that with narratives, "maybe, hopefully, the reader reads it and maybe, is led to draw their own conclusions a little bit more just by the flow of how you've chosen to present the information."

Chris asserts that he has to deal with persuasion in submitted content from "contributors who maybe have an agenda" where "how they've chosen to write up something, maybe the way its set up, benefits their message more than it does convey," what he thinks is the basic idea of "what they're trying to say to the reader." what [he] wants the basic idea about what they're trying to say to the reader." Chris acknowledges that "content marketing is really big right now," but asserts that submitted content "can still be objective and [written] in a way that is interesting and draws people in, and [he thinks] that ends up working better than writing it in a more aggressive argumentative style."

### **John Howell, Editorial Director, *Just Means***

\*Did not have time to ask about persuasion

### **Anne Fischer, Managing Editor, *Solar Novus Today***

Anne thinks the narrative form is more engaging and persuasive than the argumentative form since it can provide a real word context and application to new technology or processes,

sort of like a “how to” for the reader. She asserts that her team focuses on trying “to make things accessible and interesting even if it’s not fully in a narrative style.”

**Carly Rixham, Editor/Art Editor/Publisher, *Solar Today***

According to Carly, “fact-based stories also can be told in a story-type of persuasion,” so she thinks “it’s a great way to connect and relate to people.”

**Trevor Galbraith, Content Manager/Editor, *Global Solar and Alternative Energies***

According to Trevor, Narratives are more persuasive than argumentative forms when they’re in “a full article form, but sometimes when you’ve got something new coming in, it’s interesting to see it in the form of a press release.

**David Brearley, Senior Technical Editor, *Solar Pro***

If narratives are “executed well,” David asserted they can have a strong persuasive ability. According to David, “even when you’re just looking at content as a way of marketing vehicles, the best marketing vehicles is the stuff that doesn’t look like marketing material.” He further asserted that “readers are pretty sophisticated” and that he personally tunes out “anything that comes across as kind of like a sales pitch.” Instead, he says he looks for content that relates to activities he’s engaged with “on a day-to-day basis, and certainly stuff that solves problems,” and thinks “the narrative structure can be more engaging that way” since it’s “kind of reading less like a press release or something.”

David said, “Project Profiles are actually one way that’s relatively simple for an advertiser to get some sway.” They tell advertisers, “if this product is everything you say it is, then why can’t you connect this with something who’s installing the product and solving problems for them and we’ll put it down to a Project Profile.”

David confirmed he thinks the article form, narrative versus argumentative in particular, affects the reader’s reception of the ideas involved. He said that although they “don’t do a lot” because their content is “complicated technically,” they “do try do cover things in a little bit of a more conversational manner,” and that in their case, “the conversational approach is important.” He said that because, “it’s a community, and... the narrative structure is a little bit more, not top-down, and also a lot of these topics are not cut and dry, particularly codes and standards and installation practices, there’s a lot of interpretation that goes into things.” He went on to say that if they were “presenting a lot of these concepts in a little more of a “these are the facts, this is the way you’re gonna do it” kind of thing,” he thinks they’d “be wrong more often” because “the answer to a lot of these engineering questions is it depends.” He said they try instead to “understand the reasons why” and to “understand a little more holistically and a little more complicated,” and to him, “that’s more of a conversational approach.”

David also stated that although their authors “are very smart people,” they encourage authors to “reference primary sources when they’re available... so they can show what they’re talking about and up to date on the latest thinking on the topic, but also they interview other subject matter experts or colleagues just so that it’s not just one person’s opinion.”

**John Parnell, Head of Content, *PV-Tech***

In terms of whether a narrative can be more persuasive than just presenting the facts, John thought narrative that “narrative probably offers a better chance to change people’s minds purely because they don’t feel like their opinions are under attack,” but that, “the number of people who

are reading any form of media with the view to see if they can change their minds about something is probably fairly low.” John was “a bit skeptical about the ability to persuade people out of their point of view.” He referenced a study “that found if you present people of a certain opinion with specific hard, scientific facts and raw data that contradicts their opinion, they tend to become more entrenched.” So he thinks with the argumentative form, “people are probably going to respond poorly to that,” and cited “various instances” publishing trade cases in an argumentative format where “the response is usually that we get some unpublishable comments in the wake of it. People don’t tend to take to it well. It tends to make people reactionary.”

**Julia Pyper, Senior Editor, *Greentech Media***

Julia confirmed that she thinks the article form, narrative versus argumentative in particular, can affect the reader’s opinion on the underlying issues, but that “it depends” on choosing “a story format that matches the subject matter.” “I think it definitely can depending on the issue. You can have a meandering narrative that people don’t have any concrete takeaways, like well that was an interesting story. NPR does these interviews sometimes where they’ll interview one person to like stand for an entire town, and you’re like well what did I takeaway? I took away that one person’s experience. I don’t actually know the broader scenario, but it is a way of telling a story. It’s not wrong, but I think it really just depends on what your story is. You gotta pick a story format that matches the subject matter.”

She listed a recently published article on climate change by “a mainstream publication” as an example of the persuasiveness of narrative. “It was based off actual scientific research but he really took it to the extreme and like descriptive of what a future under a specific climate change scenario would be, and it got tons of traction because I think it resonated with people that it could be so dire and so bleak. It had over a million views, and something like climate change doesn’t usually get that many views.”

“So yeah, it’s the right kind of publication that had a controversial spin on it and it was very descriptive and people could actually imagine this climate changed future. So that narrative form really worked well in that scenario, but I think your question was is it effective or does it resonate? I think the answer is, it depends.”