



Nuclear Policy Storylistening Exercise Project Report

1. Introduction

This report provides a record of the Nuclear Policy Storylistening Exercise (NPSE) carried out during 2023 and supported by the University of Cambridge Arts and Humanities Impact Fund. The project's purpose was to demonstrate how storylistening can inform decision-making and to provide insights for today's decision-makers in nuclear policy (here referring to nuclear war or warfare), by collaboratively exploring the interplay between stories and policy. As might be expected with a novel approach, the project met many of its objectives, but not all. In doing so, it has provided essential insights for the better design of other projects concerned with public reasoning, the humanities and narrative evidence.

2. Method

The project was overseen by a **Steering Group** of five: two members with practitioner experience and three with academic experience [Annex A]. Three were also members of the project team, and two were external to it. The Group's role was to agree and oversee the "client" requirement, project scope, workshop details, and the nature of the Quality Assurance of the final outputs.

The project carried out seven semi-structured **expert practitioner interviews**. The findings conveyed perspectives from senior individuals with backgrounds in defence and diplomacy in the UK and NATO. An unattributed summary of the findings was used to inform the stimulus papers and the expert workshop, made available on the [project webpage](#) as the NPSE Practitioner Interview Summary Findings report.

The project commissioned ten **stimulus papers** (up to 1.5K words), written by academics from across the humanities and social sciences with narrative expertise, to inform an expert workshop. The authors each carried out a light touch synthesis of existing evidence within their disciplinary area, selecting and organising it in response to questions specified by the project team. Given their brevity and purpose, the papers were not independently peer-reviewed. The Stimulus Papers and Guidance for Authors are available on the project webpage.

The **expert workshop** was a two-day event, held in person in London in March 2023. The Workshop Programme and Workshop Slides are available on the project webpage. It included a total of 27 participants including individuals working in academia, the public sector and civil society. In a mix of small group and plenary sessions, participants explored questions of nuclear policy through the lens of each of the four functions of the storylistening framework, and took part in a futures exercise. They then collaboratively developed the headlines and outline findings for an intended full project report.



3. Highlights of Workshop Discussion

The **areas of exploration and discussion which emerged during the workshop** included:

1. The extent to which narratives which are dominant within some key groups are still primarily those of the 20th century and so might need to be diversified in order to form robust bases for reasoning about the future.
2. The potential for narrative evidence to be used to encourage and facilitate systemic thinking.
3. The need, at least within some groups, for stories about charismatic historic events to be constantly updated, and the reasons for and consequences of their perceived popularity relative to other potentially significant stories to be more explicitly considered.
4. A further exploration of the ways in which the evolution of popular and public narratives that are perceived increasingly to reflect multiple types of global crisis, such as those associated with climate change or AI, will help ensure a more informed public basis for future decisions with respect to nuclear policy.

4. Impacts

The workshop enabled discussion between people working in a shared field of interest, but with very different disciplinary and practitioner perspectives, many of whom had not met before. Oral feedback from the participants showed that overall the storylistening framework provided a helpful, rigorous and novel framing for such discussions.

For humanities academic participants with little experience of policy-facing or interdisciplinary work, engagement with the project through the workshop or as a stimulus paper author proved effective in rapidly building the skills, capacity, confidence and interest needed for future engagement in policy and future engagement with other disciplines.

Written post-event feedback reported that the workshop created new relationships, stimulated new ideas, prompted further reading, and prompted changes in subsequent activities:

1. The workshop led to new professional contacts across fields and sectors, facilitating post-workshop follow-up and practical cooperation. The interdisciplinarity of the workshop, and the small-group tasks, were noted as very useful in this respect.
2. The workshop enabled the creation and dissemination of new knowledge, prompting new enquiry and engagement. Alexander Evans, LSE and HM Diplomatic Service, noted that of particular use in this respect were the 'framing around storytelling, content from the stimulus papers, reading suggestions. This will reshape the courses I offer at the LSE, and contribute to my policy and board work'.



“I found backcasting very useful. I read more around the technique, and I recently ran a backcasting session with the British Academy policy team, using the plot of the movie Threads as a starting point example before moving on to use the technique to look at our own portfolio of activities.”

Adam Wright, Head of Public Policy, British Academy

3. Participants noted the challenges and opportunities of bringing humanities and social science scholars, and policymakers together, observing the language and culture gaps that exist between academia and policy, and resistance to engagement/entrenchment sometimes found on both sides. But they praised the workshop for helping to bridge those, through its structure, participant curation, and the open atmosphere and safe space created by the project team.
4. Feedback confirmed that such events themselves, rather than perhaps any outputs from them, can be most impactful:

“as always with these kinds of events, I learned (or rather I had learning reinforced) just how powerful these convenings themselves are. Regardless of the policy relevant insights that may or may not have been garnered from the two days, the fact of being together and of having a more ‘meta’ conversation than is usually the case, was impactful. And to do so amid a diverse group of professionals with differing perspectives, was immensely rewarding and a great device for building empathy and understanding.”

*Peter Waring, Consultant with UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs
[at time of feedback]*

5. Useful Lessons Learnt

The Steering Committee took the view that it was not possible to create a report that satisfied all the necessary criteria that the project had set itself. But in addition to all the project materials - publicly available to inform other policy impact work - and the positive outcomes highlighted above, the NPSE project also produced useful lessons for the future:

1. The need to ensure there is sector-specific expertise on the project team, as well as on the Steering Group. This will ensure the rigour and robustness of written outputs at the drafting stage.
2. The extent to which there is (at least sometimes) a trade-off between ease of achieving impact and breadth of scope: narrower questions, if developed within the project through collaboration between participants, are more likely to enable rapid application of existing evidence in ways that deliver immediately policy-relevant findings.



3. The challenge of designing a project that accommodates the different timescales inherent within any major policy issue. The collection and use of narrative evidence for immediate policy questions requires different design choices (types of evidence, expertise, framing and so on) from the choices concerned with medium or long term questions, even though the storylistening framework itself applies to both. In particular, practitioners tended to be uncomfortable with highly speculative, and very long term thinking, which might drive out consideration of known challenges and opportunities, while academics tended to be uncomfortable with prescribed questions whose boundaries, including temporal ones, did not fit their own ways of working or existing knowledge.
4. Recognition that, however careful the planning and preparation, robust interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral work takes time, requiring repeated interactions between individuals over a longer period than was possible with a project of this scale. Extended engagement enables participants to develop shared language, mental models and questions, in turn leading to robust and well-expressed new findings. The experience of the workshop reinforced the notion that in-person exchanges are essential for at least part of the development of such engagement and mutual learning. Given the importance of events that bring people together, future project design should do more to build in opportunities to build and sustain such relationships.
5. Giving greater importance within an impact project to relationship, network and capacity building is, of course, in tension with the academic requirement for reports and publications as the dominant embodiment of the value of academic work, even academic work intended to influence policy. For the benefit of encouraging academics to take part, for some projects this may lead to the need to have both academic and non-academic outputs. This further increases a project's cost, complexity and time commitment which, again, will need to be designed in.

These learnings are now being tested in other exploratory storylistening projects, and will usefully inform other academic-policy impact work.



ANNEX A: Steering Group
[affiliations are as of time of project duration]

Dr Claire Craig, University of Oxford, Provost of The Queen's College Oxford

Professor Sarah Dillon, University of Cambridge, Professor of Literature and the Public Humanities

Professor Matthew Jones, London School of Economics, Professor of History
[External]

Tom McKane, Royal United Services Institute, Senior Associate Fellow; LSE, Visiting Senior Fellow [External]

Dr Elena Violaris, University of Cambridge, Project Fellow