Solar story toolkit for community journalists

Types of solar stories

Journalists can help readers become educated about solar energy and engaged in the conversation about the implications of solar for our communities.

Some of the types of stories you might cover are:

- Rooftop solar, including whether it's incorporated into new construction, changes in rules about how people are compensated, and how leased solar panels are performing
- Co-ops, microgrids, and other local collaborations
- Solar panels in public spaces, including parks, schools, libraries, airports, and open-space lands
- Solar farms or other utility-scale solar energy projects
- The regulations and incentives around a controversial project
- A project on the agenda of your local government
- State and federal rulemaking, lawmaking, and incentives, and how proposals could affect your community

Common misconceptions and prevalent misinformation

Solar is more expensive or less reliable... Solar energy is the cheapest and fastest-growing source of new energy, according to the **U.S. Department of Energy**. There are upfront costs in buying the panels and batteries, and costs associated with operating solar infrastructure, but also look at savings over time.

Solar is controversial... 74% of Arizonans agree that action is needed to transition to clean energy, according to the **Center for the Future of Arizona**. But local decisions and policy disputes may be decided along party lines, because Democrats and independents are more likely to rate clean energy as an important issue than Republicans.

Solar is an intermittent power source... That's true, but the misleading implication is that solar can't serve our power needs. Part of the answer is storage (batteries) and part is having a mix of electricity technologies to meet our power needs. The mix will be different based on local factors.

The solar cells we have today are the ones we'll have 30 years from now... The tech is getting better and is being adapted for more uses and a greater diversity of markets. It's also important to acknowledge the lifespan and waste stream of solar panels.

If we move quickly toward solar, it won't be equitable... This is a negative spin problem. Policy decisions could be made with equity in mind.

Solar is clean and unproblematic... This is a positive spin problem. Solar is definitely cleaner than other forms of energy, with significantly lower emissions, but there are still sustainability questions, including where materials will be sourced and how they will be disposed of or reused.

Explainers and experts for reporting

Getting up to speed with explainers

- **PVeducation.com** – Get up to speed on technical aspects of a proposed project
- **How Solar Energy Works** – Explainers from the Union of Concerned Scientists
- **Resources for solar customers** – Links and tips from the **Arizona Solar Energy Industries Association**
- **Renewable energy dashboards** – State-by-state stats about solar (as of 2021) from the Environment America Research & Policy Center
- **Solar + agriculture** – FAQ from the U.S. Department of Energy

Finding experts

- Arizona university system expert-search tools – Find experts using a keyword search at **Arizona State University**, the **University of Arizona**, and **Northern Arizona University**
- **QESST** – Arizona State University's solar energy research center, sponsored by the National Science Foundation and the U.S. Department of Energy
- **Solar Energy Industries Association** – Use the member directory to find local businesses in your area. The local chapter is the **Arizona Solar Energy Industries Association**
- **IEEE Photovoltaic Specialists Conference** – Browse speakers to find topic-specific experts and new research

More resources for journalists

- **Solar Panel Stories Tip Sheet** – Quick overview of national policy and economic context, plus starter story ideas, from the **Society for Environmental Journalists**
- **Covering Climate Now** – Resources from a collaborative of news organizations with climate beats
- **The Journalist's Resource** – Tip sheets on new research covering a variety of topics, including energy and the environment, by the Harvard Kennedy School's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy

Design choices and starter questions

The transition to solar will be complex. People are making consequential design decisions now. Journalists can help communities make informed decisions.

Audiences deserve nuanced stories that go beyond "tech specs" to build understanding of what various design choices might mean for their communities, and empower them to choose what's best for them.

Here are some ideas for questions to ask.

Geography

What factors led to the proposed project being located where it is, and what alternatives were considered? How will the project get tied to the electric grid and other existing systems? Where will the power go? How do local and state policies encourage or discourage solar on buildings, agricultural lands, public lands, rooftops, and parking lots? How will the project shape neighboring communities, in good and bad ways? What could be the impacts on local or migrating wildlife?

Scale

How can our local area and state get solar power from large, centralized systems? How can we get power from small, distributed systems? What difference will these projects make for the power needs of a community our size?

Ownership and costs

Who will own the panels, and who will pay for them? Who will benefit from the power generated, and at whose expense? What are the perspectives of utilities or independent power companies, municipalities, homeowners, businesses, and banks? What kinds of jobs will be created, and for whom?

What is the cost of acquisition and construction? How much are landowners paid for leased use of their land for solar installations? What is the cost of operations over time? If the project isn't near the point of consumption, what is the cost of transmission or storage?

Governance and equity

How will use be regulated? Who makes and enforces the rules? Who will respond to problems or make repairs?

What policies are being made and what are the underlying choices, trade-offs, and commitment of resources?

What is the context of past policy choices and future policy limitations? What other local context is important for readers to know?

How are the benefits and risks distributed? Does the project reinforce existing inequities, or help solve them? Does it create new inequities?

Is there community involvement in decision-making? Whose voices were left out? What are the perspectives of residents, business owners, financiers, lawmakers, regulators, managers, and activists?

How does the decision-making process work, and what are the specific details about how locals can participate or give feedback?

Aesthetics

Is the project considered ugly or beautiful? Do panels blend in with their surroundings or stick out? How will the project change landscapes and viewsheds? How will it change people's sense of place, local identity, and connection to lands? Is there a public art component?

Supply chain

Where will the materials to build the project come from? Where are factories and jobs located? What are the environmental risks?

Waste and recycling

When something is broken, who will fix it? When panels stop working, how will they be disposed of or reused?

Audience and trust considerations

Explain the mission. Include a note with stories that explains why you're covering this story and the purpose of the story. Is it to explain a complex topic? To help people evaluate potential actions and their impacts? To hold local governments or utility companies accountable?

Identify unknowns. If there are unanswered questions, identify those for audiences so they're not left believing you didn't ask.

Include clear information about what people can do about problems. This can help people prepare for change, participate in processes, or take action of another kind. This can help journalists reach skeptics and encourage audiences to share the story. Avoid lumping all people who have questions or doubts into one category.

Put technical terms into basic, practical language whenever possible. Consider including a box with a glossary of terms, or linking to one online. Avoid the use of intimidating jargon that makes it seem like the audience needs to know something about solar before participating in the community conversation. Ask sources to explain their use of terms like "green" or "renewable."

Get more ideas about building trust with your audience from Trusting News, a project of the Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute at the Missouri School of Journalism and the American Press Institute.

What to watch for watchdog and accountability coverage

Learn about and watch the permitting processes for different types of solar projects

Learn about available funding resources at the city, state, and federal levels, and from foundations and nonprofit organizations

Federal (with a local angle)

The Bureau of Land Management regulates solar on certain federal lands.

- Arizona press releases and public information officer (PIO) contacts
- Project information and contacts
- Public meeting video recordings for replay.

BLM projects can also pop up in federal legislation. In May 2023, Arizona's senators Kyrsten Sinema and Mark Kelly proposed the La Paz County Solar Energy and Job Creation Act (S. 1657), which

would transfer 4,800 acres of federal land to La Paz County for the completion of a large-scale solar farm. Additionally, the senators support extending the temporary pause on new solar tariffs.

Watch **U.S. Department of Energy announcements** about funding for solar projects, including projects in **Indigenous nations**.

Explore local projects, tax credits, and incentives related to the federal Inflation Reduction Act (2022) and Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (2021).

State

The **Arizona Corporation Commission** regulates siting, permitting, and transmission in Arizona. The commission's **docket** is searchable by keyword and includes siting committee records and many other public records.

- **Press releases**.
- PIO and commissioner **contact info**
- **Siting committee details**. The siting committee has a long backlog of solar projects.
- The Arizona Governor's **Office of Resiliency**, a new agency for water, energy, and land, was **announced in 2023**.

At the statehouse:

- **Arizona State Senate Committee on Natural Resources, Energy and Water**
- **Arizona State House Committee of Natural Resources, Energy and Water**

Another helpful resource is this collection of **policy briefs** from the Energy Policy Innovation Council at Arizona State University (last updated 2019)

Local

Get to know your local governments' plans for transition to clean energy and emissions reductions, and follow the progress of those plans. Ask about the costs and efficiencies from solar panels on existing and new public buildings.

Learn about the local permitting processes and follow them.

Look for and follow local energy-and-environment committees that advise public officials.

About this toolkit

This toolkit was curated by journalist Becky Pallack during a 2023 Solar Tomorrows Fellowship at Arizona State University's **Center for Science and the Imagination** and **Center for Energy and Society**, with advisement from those teams and several journalists who generously provided input. The fellowship was supported by a grant made as part of "The Energy of One, The Power of Many" program from **EarthShare**, a fundraising group that supports environmental and conservation organizations.

Further reading

Science fiction stories can be powerful ways to help people understand the implications of solar design choices. Read about hopeful solar futures in ***Cities of Light*** (2021) and ***The Weight of Light*** (2019), two collections of technically grounded short fiction, art, and expert perspectives about how a transition to solar energy could transform our communities. Both books are published by the Center for Science and the Imagination at Arizona State University and are free to download, read, and share in a variety of formats.