Sharing Stories You Can't Ignore:
How to Use Visibility to Shape Innovation, Trust, and Investment

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This paper examines the role of visibility, narrative strategy, and cognitive framing in shaping public trust, policy attention, and investment surrounding Black energy researchers and energy innovation. Drawing from neuroscience-informed communication principles, media analysis, and contemporary examples of public-facing climate and energy storytelling, the paper argues that research influence is determined not solely by scientific rigor, but by the extent to which discoveries become emotionally relevant, publicly legible, and culturally memorable.

Despite growing national investment in clean energy infrastructure and climate innovation, Black researchers remain significantly underrepresented within federally funded research ecosystems and mainstream narratives surrounding innovation leadership. Existing disparities in Department of Energy (DOE), National Science Foundation (NSF), and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) funding to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) contribute not only to infrastructure inequities, but also to diminished public visibility and reduced narrative association between Black researchers and the future of energy innovation itself.

These disparities are documented in Advancing Equity in Energy Research: Overcoming Barriers and Building Pathways (2024), which identifies persistent inequities in research funding, publication visibility, mentorship access, and institutional infrastructure affecting Black energy researchers and HBCUs. This paper builds upon those findings by examining how visibility itself functions as a structural determinant influencing public trust, market recognition, and investment behavior.

At the same time, mainstream science coverage occupies only a small fraction of the public media ecosystem. As a result, audiences rarely encounter research stories, and even more rarely encounter Black researchers within those stories. This paper contends that the absence of repeated visibility shapes public perception in profound ways, influencing who markets trust, who institutions fund, and whose work becomes associated with innovation leadership.

To address this challenge, the paper introduces the BELIEF Framework™—a neuroscience-informed narrative architecture model designed to help researchers,

institutions, and policymakers craft stories that reduce cognitive overload, increase emotional salience, and strengthen public engagement. The framework emphasizes six integrated dimensions: beginning with human consequence, establishing emotional relevance, localizing impact, inviting audiences into future possibility, earning trust through repeated visibility, and framing research around meaning rather than technical complexity.

Case studies examining the public visibility of Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson, Dr. Tony Reames, and Donnel Baird demonstrate how emotionally resonant storytelling, repeated media exposure, and human-centered framing contributed to expanded public influence, policy engagement, and investment visibility. These examples illustrate that the stories most likely to shape markets and policy conversations are those that translate technical systems into narratives audiences can emotionally process, socially repeat, and future-cast.

The paper concludes that increasing equity within energy research requires more than expanded funding pipelines alone. It also requires intentional narrative infrastructure capable of positioning Black energy researchers within the broader public imagination as visible contributors to the future of energy innovation, resilience, and economic transformation.

Keywords:
Energy communication · neuroscience · cognitive framing · narrative strategy · public trust · media visibility · HBCU research · climate communication · energy justice · storytelling · innovation ecosystems · BELIEF Framework™

Introduction

Somewhere in the world, a family will decide whether to pay the electric bill or buy groceries. Somewhere else, a researcher is developing a solution that could ease that burden—yet most people will never hear their name, understand their work, or connect that discovery to the realities shaping their own lives.

That distance between innovation and recognition sits at the center of this paper.

Conversations surrounding energy innovation frequently focus on technology, infrastructure, and investment. Far less attention is given to the role visibility and storytelling play in determining which discoveries gain traction within public consciousness and which remain largely unseen. Yet markets, institutions, and policy ecosystems are shaped not only by information, but by perception. People invest in

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futures they can emotionally visualize. They trust ideas they repeatedly encounter. They remember stories that help them make meaning of complex systems.

Behavioral science and neuroscience research suggest that audiences are significantly more likely to engage with information that feels emotionally relevant, cognitively accessible, and repeatedly visible within public culture (Kahneman, 2011; Medina, 2014; Zak, 2014). As a result, the stories surrounding innovation often become as influential as the innovation itself.

For Black energy researchers, this reality carries significant implications. Underrepresentation within research funding ecosystems intersects with underrepresentation within public narratives surrounding innovation leadership. The result is not only diminished access to resources, but diminished association between Black researchers and the future of energy innovation itself.

The 2024 report Advancing Equity in Energy Research: Overcoming Barriers and Building Pathways documents how disparities in research funding, publication visibility, and institutional support contribute to systemic underrepresentation within energy innovation ecosystems. This paper argues that those structural disparities extend beyond research infrastructure into the realm of public cognition and narrative association.

This paper further argues that visibility functions as a form of infrastructure. It shapes public trust, influences investment behavior, and determines which discoveries become socially memorable enough to influence markets, policy, and institutional priorities.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is grounded in neuroscience-informed communication theory and narrative persuasion research. Human beings do not process information neutrally. Cognitive science demonstrates that attention is filtered through relevance, emotional salience, familiarity, and perceived future consequence.

Kahneman (2011) argues that human beings rely heavily on cognitive shortcuts and intuitive processing when evaluating information, particularly in environments saturated with complexity and competing stimuli. Medina (2014) similarly notes that attention and retention are strengthened when information is emotionally engaging and connected to survival, meaning, or future consequence.

Research in neuroscience and behavioral psychology further suggests that stories activate memory and empathy more effectively than isolated data points. Emotion strengthens memory encoding, while repeated exposure increases perceived legitimacy

and trust. Simultaneously, cognitive overload reduces comprehension and disengages audiences from otherwise important information.

Zajonc's (1968) research on repeated exposure further suggests that familiarity itself increases trust and perceived legitimacy. Applied to media ecosystems, this principle helps explain how repeated visibility shapes public assumptions surrounding who is perceived as an innovator, expert, or industry leader.

Zak (2014) demonstrates that stories activating emotional engagement increase empathy, retention, and behavioral responsiveness more effectively than information presented through detached factual communication alone. Berger (2013) similarly argues that ideas spread when they are emotionally resonant, socially meaningful, and easily repeatable.

Together, these frameworks suggest that visibility functions not merely as communication strategy, but as cognitive infrastructure shaping public understanding, institutional trust, and market influence.

Context and Case Evidence

Despite substantial national investment in climate and clean energy infrastructure, Black researchers remain significantly underrepresented within federally funded research ecosystems. According to Advancing Equity in Energy Research: Overcoming Barriers and Building Pathways (2024), HBCUs received only 1.1% of Department of Energy university research grants between 2000 and 2020, despite their historic role in advancing educational opportunity and community-centered innovation.

The report also documents disproportionately low representation within energy-related publication ecosystems and persistent barriers to mentorship, collaboration, and institutional support. These disparities affect not only infrastructure and research capacity, but public visibility itself.

Visibility disparities extend beyond academia. Pew Research Center (2017) found that only a minority of Americans regularly consume science and technology news, while science reporting constitutes a relatively small share of mainstream media coverage overall. Consequently, the public's understanding of innovation is shaped by a narrow set of highly visible narratives repeatedly amplified across media ecosystems. Against this backdrop, several public-facing figures demonstrate how narrative framing can significantly expand visibility and influence.

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Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson emerged as a nationally recognized climate communicator by translating climate science into emotionally resonant conversations surrounding future possibility, resilience, and public consequence. Her appearances across TIME (2024), PBS NewsHour (2024), and NPR (2024) helped transform climate communication from abstract policy discourse into a human-centered narrative about collective futures. Johnson's public visibility demonstrates Berger's (2013) argument that ideas spread when they are emotionally resonant, socially meaningful, and easily repeatable.

Similarly, Dr. Tony Reames expanded national conversations surrounding energy burden and utility inequity by connecting energy systems directly to household realities. Rather than positioning energy justice solely as policy analysis, his work framed energy insecurity as an issue affecting family stability, health, and economic survival. Coverage from The Washington Post (2022) and the U.S. Department of Energy (2022) amplified these conversations into broader public discourse. Donnel Baird and BlocPower further demonstrated the power of narrative framing by translating clean energy infrastructure into visible community transformation.

Through storytelling centered on housing, jobs, electrification, and neighborhood impact, BlocPower attracted national media attention, venture capital visibility, and expanded public understanding of equitable energy innovation. Coverage from TIME (2021), TED (2021), and The New Yorker (2019) positioned clean energy not as an abstract technological system, but as a visible community issue connected to economic mobility and quality of life.

Collectively, these examples illustrate that the stories most likely to shape markets are often the stories that make complex systems feel human.

The BELIEF Framework™

The BELIEF Framework™ synthesizes insights from neuroscience, behavioral psychology, strategic communication, and public engagement research. It reflects the understanding that audiences do not simply process information analytically; they interpret information emotionally, socially, and cognitively. The framework is designed to help researchers and institutions craft narratives capable of increasing public engagement, reducing cognitive overload, and strengthening emotional resonance.

BEGIN WITH HUMAN CONSEQUENCE

Effective research storytelling begins by identifying what changes in people's lives because the research exists. Human beings prioritize information connected to safety, stability, health, and quality of life.

INVITE THE AUDIENCE INTO THE FUTURE
Future-oriented framing helps audiences emotionally imagine possibility, transformation, and long-term impact. This is especially important in conversations surrounding energy transition and climate resilience.

ESTABLISH EMOTIONAL RELEVANCE
Audiences are more likely to remember and engage with information when emotional stakes are clear. Urgency, hope, tension, and transformation increase attentional salience and retention.

EARN TRUST THROUGH VISIBILITY
Repeated public exposure increases familiarity and perceived legitimacy. Research narratives should therefore exist beyond academic journals and institutional reports, extending into mainstream media, podcasts, policy discussions, conferences, and social storytelling ecosystems.*

LOCALIZE THE IMPACT
Research becomes more cognitively accessible when audiences can visualize where it appears in real life—homes, neighborhoods, utility bills, transportation systems, hospitals, and communities.

FRAME AROUND MEANING, NOT COMPLEXITY
The goal of effective communication is not to reduce rigor, but to reduce unnecessary cognitive friction. Research becomes influential when audiences can quickly understand why it matters.**

*This principle aligns with Zajonc's (1968) research demonstrating that repeated exposure increases perceived legitimacy and trustworthiness.
**Kahneman (2011) and Medina (2014) both suggest that audiences naturally gravitate toward information requiring lower cognitive effort while maintaining emotional relevance and clarity.

Conclusion

The challenge facing Black energy researchers is not a lack of curiosity, talent, or innovation capacity. It is the absence of sustained narrative infrastructure capable of translating discovery into public meaning.
Research shapes the future when people can emotionally connect to its consequences, visualize its possibilities, and repeatedly encounter the individuals behind the work.

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Visibility, therefore, is not separate from innovation. Visibility determines what becomes trusted, funded, remembered, and ultimately scaled.

As Berger (2013) notes, ideas spread not simply because they are important, but because they are memorable, emotionally resonant, and socially transmissible. For Black energy researchers, this reality underscores the importance of narrative infrastructure alongside research infrastructure.

Expanding equity within energy innovation therefore requires more than access to funding alone. It requires sustained public visibility capable of reshaping the stories institutions, markets, and communities learn to associate with the future of innovation. The future of energy innovation will not only be shaped by discovery. It will also be shaped by which discoveries the public learns to believe in.

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