The 2025 AAAS Annual Meeting: Storytelling and More

Abdurrahman Radwan, Francesca Landon-Harding, Madison Brown, and Barbara Gastel

Themed "Science Shaping Tomorrow," the 2025 American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) annual meeting, held February 13–15 in Boston, MA, included stories of science and its communication and advice on telling such stories. This report shares some highlights of potential interest to science editors and those in related realms.

Bringing Science and Technology to Life with Short-Form Video

By Abdurrahman Radwan

Short-form video is going viral—even in traditional media. A workshop featuring editors from *Scientific American* highlighted how platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts are transforming science communication and engaging younger audiences. The workshop also offered tips for scientists and communicators on how to create the most effective videos for each platform.

Workshop coordinator Arminda Downey-Mavromatis, associate engagement editor, began by defining short-form video and sharing key engagement statistics. She explained that these videos last 30 seconds to 3 minutes, are shot vertically, and receive 2.5 times as much engagement as long-form videos, with a 60%–70% higher completion rate. She also noted that 64% of Gen Z and 49% of Millennials use TikTok as a search engine.

Sunya Bhutta, chief audience engagement editor, compared the 3 major platforms. She highlighted TikTok's trend-driven nature, creative editing tools, and comment-reply video feature that enhances engagement. Instagram Reels, she said, offer a polished aesthetic and benefit from being saved to Meta's ecosystem, increasing visibility. YouTube Shorts, although simpler and lacking advanced effects, are effective for driving engagement to long-form videos, as the long-form videos can simply be cut into multiple short-form ones.

Kelso Harper, senior multimedia editor, emphasized that an effective short-form science video needs a strong hook within the first 3–5 seconds. Scripts should be concise—about 150 words/minute—with clear visuals, such as green-screen effects or animations. Authenticity is key, she said, and removing pauses during editing ensures smooth pacing. Testing the script with a nonexpert friend can help ensure clarity and engagement.

Clara Moskowitz, senior editor for space and physics, reassured attendees that feeling awkward on camera is normal. She encouraged embracing natural communication styles over striving for perfection, as audiences value authenticity over polish. She also offered the following tip: Have a colleague read each line aloud, after which you repeat it on camera. Then edit out the colleague's segments. This approach, she explained, avoids the need to memorize, helps reduce performance anxiety, and yields smoother delivery.

Communicating Science to Gen Alpha Through Storytelling

By Francesca Landon-Harding

Lindsay Patterson and Sara Robberson Lentz, CEO and COO of Tumble Media, a company producing science podcasts for children, presented a workshop on practices scientists can use to engage children through storytelling without oversimplifying ideas.

Gen Alpha, born between 2010 and 2024, is the largest generation in history, constituting roughly 23% of the global population. In the United States, these "digital natives" account for 36 million active internet users. "If you want to reach them," noted Patterson, "that [the internet and social media] is where you have to be."

In communicating with this young population, the speakers said it's important to keep their attention span in mind. They noted that podcasts tap into the ancient art of storytelling, while allowing listeners the flexibility to complete other tasks simultaneously.

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Figure. Meeting reporters (from left to right) Francesca Landon-Harding, Abdurrahman Radwan, and Madison Brown.

Tumble Media's podcasts are about 20 minutes long, the length of the average commute to school. Every story features at least one scientist. Each scientist is asked the same 3 questions:

- "How would you describe what you do to a 7-year-old?"
- "What has your experience taught you about how science works?"
- "Why do you do what you do?"

"Kids don't care about the adult stuff like university affiliations, awards, or tenure," stated Robberson Lentz. "They relate to emotion." So, she said, insert enthusiasm and youthfulness into your voice. Think about what is surprising, unexpected, and fun. Help kids understand the nuance of science by talking about things you don't like.

Kids are seeking authenticity, not authority, Robberson Lentz added. Sharing your why can make you more relatable, unearthing the humanity behind the scientist. "Kids are like everyone else," she said. "They want to be seen and communicated to." The speakers encouraged scientists to imagine a Gen Alpha kid they might know. Try drawing a comparison to something relevant to the kid's life, they said. Use familiar language and keep their existing knowledge in mind.

Toward the end, audience members broke into small groups. Using Patterson's 3 questions, participants explored each other's whys. The workshop ended with a full-group discussion of participants' experiences in answering these questions.

Scary Science: Risk, Danger, and Public Communication

By Madison Brown

How can scientists and journalists communicate with the public about "scary" scientific topics—such as climate change, earthquakes, and AI—without promoting fear? This session sought to address this question.

Robert F Chen, of the University of Massachusetts School for the Environment, discussed "Climate Change, Community, and Communication: Connecting Science and People." He began by advising scientists to make climate change personal for the average person. In addition, he stated that "simple messages repeated often by trusted messengers [scientists] are effective." He also said to remain hopeful, optimistic, and ready to invest in student innovations.

Journalist Anna Kuchment discussed reporting she did for the *Dallas Morning News*. Most of her presentation, titled "How a Pro-Oil and Gas Public Reacted to News of Fracking-Related Earthquakes," described public reactions to earthquakes resulting from fracking. Some citizens were distraught about the earthquakes, while others deemed them necessary in order to drill for oil and gas. Kuchment stressed the importance of conveying all the facts and said not to be afraid of presenting scientific evidence that may make people uncomfortable.

Brian K Smith, a professor in the school of education and the computer science department at Boston College, spoke on "Doom-Saying About AI: Helping Journalists Understand Science and Not Panic." Using ChatGPT as an example, he described "the AI panic cycle," in which a new AI technology is greeted with panic, the panic peaks, and then the panic declines over time. To help decrease public panic, Smith encouraged journalists to identify unreasonably definite predictions about AI and raise questions about the motivations behind them. He then cautioned against feeding into hype and said to instead think critically about how AI affects the everyday person. He finished by encouraging the listeners to convey diverse perspectives when talking about AI and the impacts it may have.

Science Breakthrough of the Year: The Long Shot

By Barbara Gastel

Each December, *Science* announces a breakthrough of the year, chosen with input from staff throughout the journal. This session presented the story of the 2024 breakthrough of the year: the drug lenacapavir, a single injection of which has shown 100% efficacy in preventing HIV infection for 6 months in women in Africa.

Science correspondent Jon Cohen, who has long covered HIV and AIDS, moderated the session. He noted that, distinctively, lenacapavir targets the virus's capsid. He also showed an animation showing how the drug seems to work.

The session featured presentations by 4 individuals active in developing or testing the drug. Wes Sundquist, of The University of Utah, discussed the underlying basic-science research; he noted that long-term National Institutes of

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Health support was crucial to the research, which began in the mid-1990s, and that academia and industry were important allies. Similarly, Jared Baeten, of Gilead Sciences, which produces the drug, emphasized teamwork and partnership by various parties and at various stages. He stressed "always keeping your eye on the prize," which is not publication or FDA approval but rather serving society.

Also emphasizing partnerships, Linda-Gail Bekker, of the Desmond Tutu Health Foundation, Cape Town, South Africa, spoke from the perspective of a leader of the clinical trial of the drug. She recalled receiving a standing ovation after presenting the results at the conference AIDS 2024; she also recounted how, on receiving the call with the trial's results, she had "frankly just wept." Finally, Dazon Dixon-Diallo, of SisterLove, Inc, described the importance of community involvement in shaping the trial. One result, she said: Unlike other HIV prevention trials, this one did not exclude people who became pregnant.

"This is the dream team," Cohen commented after the presentations. The discussion, however, ended less positively, as Cohen asked about implications of current US politics. Panelists expressed substantial concern about continued availability of funding for research and its applications. "Don't stall at this point," Bekker said. "It is a crisis if we do."

And More

Other sessions of science communication interest included "Science for the Public and Policy: Oppenheimer, Bates, and Carson" and "How Can Public/Open Access Achieve Equity for Authors and Readers?"

The 2026 AAAS annual meeting, themed "Science @ Scale," will be held February 12–14 in Phoenix, AZ. For information, see https://meetings.aaas.org.