



REVIEW

International Communication Association meeting in Cape Town, South Africa: a promising start and a practitioner challenge for science communication

Reviewed Conference

76th Annual International Communication Association (ICA) Conference
Cape Town, South Africa
5–8 June 2026

Reviewed by

John C. Besley  and **Jennifer Metcalfe** 

Abstract

The new Science Communication Interest Group (SCIG) of the International Communication Association (ICA) met for the first time on June 5–8, 2026, in Cape Town, South Africa. Presenters shared a diversity of research with a significant proportion focused on trust, especially trust in scientists, academics or experts in the face of increasing use of artificial intelligence (AI) and rising mis- and disinformation. However, despite frequent mentions of practical implications in research abstracts, there appeared to be little emphasis in the presentations on who projects specifically sought to help and what problems researchers were seeking to solve for other researchers or practitioners. Our hope is that future conferences will integrate the sub-field's growing methodological and theoretical sophistication with an equal focus on the needs of practitioners and audiences.

Keywords

Science communication: theory and models; Professionalism, professional development and training in science communication

Received: 4th August 2026

Accepted: 11th August 2026

Published: 31st August 2026

1 - Introduction

After four years of pre-conference meetings, the new Science Communication Interest Group (SCIG) of the International Communication Association (ICA) met for the first time on June 5–8 in Cape Town this year (2026)¹ following another pre-conference on June 2 at the University of Stellenbosch.

According to SCIG chair Lars Guenther, the group received 199 submissions, including 117 full papers and 82 extended abstracts. Of these, SCIG accepted 93 abstracts for presentation. The pre-conference, which had the theme of ‘The dark side of social conversations around science: contemporary challenges and potential solutions for science communication’, saw an additional 21 presentations as well as a panel discussion and introductory and closing remarks. Most of the participating researchers were from European and Asian universities and, to a lesser extent, North America.

SCIG joins 27 divisions and six other interest groups at ICA representing a wide range of communication topics from ‘activism, communication, and social justice’ to ‘visual communication studies’. SCIG’s initial 226 members mean that it already has as many members as well-established divisions. ICA formed in 1950 and has about 4,500 members.

2 - Sophisticated presentations on trust, AI, misinformation and uncertainty

Presenters shared a diversity of science communication research in Cape Town, with a significant proportion focused on trust, especially trust in scientists, academics or experts in the face of increasing use of artificial intelligence (AI) and rising mis- and disinformation. While many of the presentations suggested that trust was a desirable outcome for science communication, others [e.g., Ratcliff et al., 2026; Kang et al., 2026] highlighted the danger of communicators pursuing unwarranted trust. For example, presentations such as ‘How communicative success blossoms from scientific failure’ [Xiao & Tan, 2026], and ‘The media hype paradox’ [Wang, 2026] suggested that some communicators might seek to obtain trust by sacrificing important values like transparency or honesty about scientific limitations or uncertainty. Other presentations [e.g., Nowak et al., 2026; Suarez et al., 2026; Xinqiao, 2026] examined how high trust may enable problematic uses of authority by scientists without adequate dialogue or recognition of non-scientific sources of knowledge. Two presentations [Zhu et al., 2026; Mede & Volk, 2026] argued that critical engagement around scientific topics should be seen as healthier than promoting blind trust in science.

Other themes presented at ICA often connected trust to other topics. A cluster of papers, for example, examined AI as both a tool for and a subject of science communication. This included Chen and Jia’s [2026] examination of the implications of scientists’ use of AI on trust. A similar number of presentations tackled the spread and countering of problematic communication. Multiple studies looked at segmenting science communication audiences, with a focus on ensuring equitable access to science with trust as a cross-cutting theme. For example, Liu et al. [2026] found that audience segments differ significantly in their trust or acceptance of AI as a tool for science communication.

1. <https://www.icahdq.org/mpage/ICA26>.

Beyond trust, presenters shared research on the changing roles of science journalism; how media platforms shape science communication; online harassment and backlash against scientists and science communicators; and the intersection between science and political communication. The presented research spanned a range of methods (quantitative surveys and content analyses, qualitative interviews, etc.) with a strong emphasis on social science-based approaches.

3 - The challenge: Making research relevant and involving practitioners

An informal review of the abstracts presented in the SCIG stream at ICA suggests that the majority included at least some mention of how research could help practitioners tailor communication to specific audience segments; navigate and use AI; use social media platforms to share messages; explain uncertainty; approach problematic communication; consider the role of science journalism; and/or embrace equity, inclusion and global perspectives.

However, despite mention of such implications in the abstracts, we (the co-authors) wish we had heard more about who research projects specifically sought to help. It was not always clear, at least in the verbal presentations, what problems researchers were seeking to solve for other researchers or practitioners. We understand there can be long-term value in curiosity-driven research, but our respective experiences also tell us there is a community of science communication practitioners eager for informed guidance on how to communicate more effectively.

In this regard, a further examination of the abstracts suggests that only about one in five studies involved communicators or audiences in research design and/or implementation. Moreover, only two of the projects presented appeared to substantively involve practitioners in their research. In a study of 'Pro-social behaviour in the context of online harassment', Egelhofer et al. [2026] implemented and evaluated a social media intervention on Instagram through co-creation involving researchers, professional science communicators, influencers and citizens. Similarly, Walter [2026] presented a four-year ethnographic study in which journalists collaborated with social scientists to produce YouTube videos and research the communication process. However, even with these two studies, the practitioners involved were not listed as co-authors. We believe this lack of involvement by practitioners in research likely contributes to research that is less relevant or useable by practitioners. This issue is likely not limited to ICA presentations and speaks to a larger gap in science communication research.

4 - A way forward

Involving practitioners in research or, at the very least, making research relevant to practitioners could take different forms. Ideally, given the prominent role that meaningful dialogue plays in science communication discussions, researchers could be more explicit about the degree to which they chose a research topic or design based on discussions with practitioners. Practitioners and even audience groups could be incorporated into research teams and co-construct the work, as shown by the two examples described above. Even better would be to see the evidence of such collaboration in the authorship of science communication research.

More broadly, we would like to see researchers demonstrating reflexivity about the degree to which their work has practical implications. Those who wish to argue for work with conceptual or theoretical implications — but limited practical implications — should equally justify their inward focus. That said, our sense is that scholars could improve their research projects by additional consideration of how they could tweak their designs so that they help solve meaningful problems (while also addressing researcher curiosity and theoretical or conceptual questions).

The frequent focus on the prevalence of misinformation and ill-treatment of science communicators — a focus of the SCIG's pre-conference — is an example of research that might benefit from discussions about how to design such research to support improved practice. Research aimed at documenting science communicators' negative experiences would be more satisfying, in this regard, if it were aimed at identifying potential priorities for future action. Similarly, documenting the degree to which Large Language Models (LLMs) are accurate might seem more interesting in the context of a discussion about what science communicators might do with the results.

One additional potential benefit gained by putting more focus on problem-focused research and involving practitioners is that doing so might help shift researchers from broad discussions about science in society to more specific topics. For example, while national-level data on what residents of a country think about science and scientists can support broad discussions about societal impacts, we also know that context shapes individuals' science-related decision-making. Such research might focus on how specific groups like communities, parents, or policymakers make sense of a new science-related decision — whether a small modular reactor, a solar or server farm, a vaccine mandate, or specific AI tools.

5 - The next ICA conference

Next year — 2027 — will provide two substantial opportunities for science communication researchers to recognise the needs and experiences of communication practitioners and the communities who rely on science communication. Our hope is that the researchers who attend the late-May Public Communication of Science & Technology (PCST) Network conference in Shanghai and the early-June ICA in Glasgow will use these gatherings to integrate our growing methodological and theoretical sophistication with the needs of practitioners for mutual benefits.

References

- Chen, C., & Jia, X. (2026). When Researchers Use AI: Public Trust, Ethical Judgments, and the Perceived Value of Academic Research [Conference presentation]. *76th Annual ICA Conference, Cape Town, South Africa, 4–8 June 2026*.
- Egelhofer, J., Goodwin, B., & Obermaier, M. (2026). Pro-social Behavior in the Context of Online Harassment of Scientists and Science Communicators: Designing and Implementing a Social Media Intervention in a Transdisciplinary Cocreation Process [Conference presentation]. *76th Annual ICA Conference, Cape Town, South Africa, 4–8 June 2026*.

- Kang, S., Dienlin, T., & Schäfer, M. S. (2026). How Trust Travels: Differential Item Functioning and Comparative Research in Science Communication [Conference presentation]. *76th Annual ICA Conference, Cape Town, South Africa, 4–8 June 2026.*
- Liu, X., Schäfer, M. S., Lokaj, G., Mahl, D., Volk, S., Lombardi, D., Metag, J., & Mede, N. G. (2026). From Undecided Novices to Informed Advocates: Segmenting Swiss Science Communication Audiences by AI Perceptions, Usage, and Information Sources [Conference presentation]. *76th Annual ICA Conference, Cape Town, South Africa, 4–8 June 2026.*
- Mede, N. G., & Volk, S. (2026). Public Backlash Against Science Communicators: Conceptualization and Qualitative Analysis of Perceptions, Effects, and Responses [Conference presentation]. *76th Annual ICA Conference, Cape Town, South Africa, 4–8 June 2026.*
- Nowak, B., Rosada, A., Goebel, G., & Krämer, N. (2026). Does It Matter Who Is Talking About Science? Comparing Epistemic Authority and Knowledge Outcomes Across Perceived Human and AI Actor Identities [Conference presentation]. *76th Annual ICA Conference, Cape Town, South Africa, 4–8 June 2026.*
- Ratcliff, C., Brück, J., Egelhofer, J., & Guenther, L. (2026). Communicating Uncertainty in Climate Science: Does 'Normalizing' Uncertainty Change Public Responses? [Conference presentation]. *76th Annual ICA Conference, Cape Town, South Africa, 4–8 June 2026.*
- Suarez, J., Sales, N. M., & Rauchfleisch, A. (2026). Academics' Social Media Engagement Predicts Policy Stringency and Mobility Dynamics During the COVID-19 Pandemic [Conference presentation]. *76th Annual ICA Conference, Cape Town, South Africa, 4–8 June 2026.*
- Walter, C. E. (2026). Social Science Communication Behind the Feed: Preparing Strategies of Responsible Boundary-Work for Social Media [Conference presentation]. *76th Annual ICA Conference, Cape Town, South Africa, 4–8 June 2026.*
- Wang, M. (2026). The Media Hype Paradox: Knowledge Gains, but Trust and Support Suffer When Expectations Fail [Conference presentation]. *76th Annual ICA Conference, Cape Town, South Africa, 4–8 June 2026.*
- Xiao, P., & Tan, X. (2026). How Communicative Success Blossoms From Scientific Failure: Introducing Network Intervention Analysis to Investigate Failure Disclosure's Effects on Public Support and Trust [Conference presentation]. *76th Annual ICA Conference, Cape Town, South Africa, 4–8 June 2026.*
- Xinqiao, Z. (2026). When AI Speaks for Science: Algorithmic Authority and Epistemic Inequality in AI-Mediated Science Communication [Conference presentation]. *76th Annual ICA Conference, Cape Town, South Africa, 4–8 June 2026.*
- Zhu, S., Wu, X., & Lu, W. (2026). Resonance or Resistance? Measuring Framing Interaction in Climate Change Communication on Douyin (Chinese TikTok) [Conference presentation]. *76th Annual ICA Conference, Cape Town, South Africa, 4–8 June 2026.*

About the authors

Dr. John C. Besley is the Ellis N. Brandt Professor of Public Relations at Michigan State University. He has authored more than a hundred articles, chapters, and reports on public opinion about science and scientists' views about communication.

 jbesley@msu.edu

Dr. Jenni Metcalfe is director of Econnect Communication (<https://www.econnect.com.au/>), established in 1995. As a science communicator since 1989, she has worked as a journalist,

practitioner, university lecturer and researcher. Jenni was a member of the scientific committee of the International Public Communication of Science and Technology (PCST) Network from 1996 to 2023. She was President from 2021 to 2023. Jenni is a Visiting Fellow at the Australian National University's Centre for Public Awareness of Science.

✉ jenni@econnect.com.au

How to cite

Besley, J. and Metcalfe, J. (2026). 'International Communication Association meeting in Cape Town, South Africa: a promising start and a practitioner challenge for science communication'. *JCOM* 25(06), R03. <https://doi.org/10.22323/430020260811183142>.



© The Author(s).

This article is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons [Attribution 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license. All rights for Text and Data Mining, AI training, and similar technologies for commercial purposes, are reserved.

ISSN 1824-2049. Published by SISSA Medialab. jcom.sissa.it