

**The “Dark Side” of social conversations around science:  
Contemporary challenges and potential solutions for science communication**  
Preconference at the 76<sup>th</sup> Annual ICA Conference

**Tuesday, 2 June 2026, 09:00 – 17:00 (Central African Time)**

Venue: Centre for Epidemic Response and Innovation ([CERI](#)) at Stellenbosch University  
(main campus), South Africa

Science communication plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions and informing policy responses to today's most pressing challenges, ranging from health and environmental crises to the societal implications of rapid technological advancements. Yet, the field faces growing pressures and complex threats, including economic and political interference, rapidly changing media ecosystems, and public or political backlash against science and scientists.

This preconference (the 4th ICA Science Communication Preconference) seeks to explore these darker dimensions of science communication and to identify constructive, evidence-informed ways forward. We invite theoretical, empirical, and practice-based contributions that reflect on how the science communication community can respond to these challenges, and whether current efforts are adequate, inclusive, and effective.

### **Background**

Science communication encompasses all forms of communication about scientific knowledge and practice by actors both within and outside the scientific community (Schäfer et al., 2019). As Bucchi and Trench (2021) describe, it involves curating and sustaining “social conversations around science” that engage scientists, journalists, policymakers, businesses, and citizens. Such conversations potentially shape scientific discourse and culture in different directions (Vogt, 2012). In recent years, several trends have intensified the challenges facing science communication, including:

- the rise of digital and hybrid media (Krause et al., 2025; Mede et al., 2025; Righetti et al., 2022; Taddicken & Krämer, 2021);
- evolving societal expectations of science and changes in trust and deference to scientific authority (Cologna et al., 2025; Bucchi & Schäfer, 2025; Department of Science and Innovation, 2025);
- the politicisation of science (Rajan et al., 2025) and the epistemisation of politics (Bogner, 2021);
- the emergence of anti-pluralist and populist movements (Bellolio, 2022; Naseemullah & Chhibber, 2024; Kinzelbach et al., 2025); and
- the rise of mis- and disinformation, as well as fake news (Gondwe et al., 2025; Wasserman and Madrid-Morales, 2019).

Together, these developments fuel hostility toward science, manifesting as political attacks, online harassment, the spread of pseudo-scientific misinformation and conspiracy theories, and the amplification of anti-science narratives by powerful actors such as celebrities and influencers. Scientists and communicators often face these pressures with limited institutional support or protection. The result is an uneven communication landscape that reinforces global and structural inequalities in who can participate in, and benefit from, science communication.

### **Call for abstracts**

Against this background, we invite abstracts that address contemporary challenges in science communication across diverse cultural and national contexts, particularly from the Global



South. Submissions may be theoretical, methodological, empirical, or practice-oriented, and should ideally include a solution-focused perspective. Possible topics include (but are not limited to):

- Harassment and intimidation of scientists and science communicators
- Political interference and attacks on scientific institutions
- Threats to academic freedom and freedom to communicate science
- The spread and strategic use of misinformation and disinformation
- Conspiracy narratives about science and scientists
- Regional or disciplinary patterns in backlash against science
- Structural inequalities in responding to backlash
- Undermining of scientific evidence by commercial or influencer-driven actors
- Institutional or policy responses to anti-science movements

The preconference will feature traditional presentation and poster sessions, as well as a participatory panel discussion, which will include invited scholars, practitioners, and attendees.

#### **Submissions should include**

1. **A cover page** with the paper title, author(s) information, 3 – 5 keywords, and a note if it is a student-led paper.
2. **An extended abstract** of 800 – 1,000 words (excluding references, tables, and figures), anonymised for peer review.

Please send both files (cover page and anonymised abstract) as separate PDFs to [icaprecon@mscl.de](mailto:icaprecon@mscl.de).

- **Submission deadline:** 2 February 2026
- **Notification of acceptance:** 2 March 2026

Please note: Proposals or abstracts already accepted to the main ICA conference are **not eligible** for this preconference. Authors may be invited to serve as reviewers.

#### **Preconference organisers**

Jana Laura Egelhofer, Marina Joubert, Bernhard Goodwin, Mehita Iqani, Niels G. Mede, Janine N. Blessing, Alice Fleerackers, John Besley, Friederike Hendriks, Nils Bienzeisler, Andreas Scheu, Maambele Khosa, and Zani de Wit.

You are welcome to send any enquiries about the conference to Zani de Wit at the email address: [zanidw@sun.ac.za](mailto:zanidw@sun.ac.za)

#### **Registration**

We are glad to confirm that there will be **no registration fee** for this preconference. We gratefully acknowledge support from **our sponsors**:

- **NRF South African Research Chair in Science Communication**, hosted at the Journalism department at Stellenbosch University
- **Centre for Epidemic Response and Innovation (CERI)**, Stellenbosch University
- **Munich Science Communication Lab (MSCL); funded by Volkswagenstiftung**

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