

////// A YEAR @ ANNENBERG connections

WINTER 2025

A New Journey Begins

Annenberg Launches Media Industries Master's Program

20

TEACHING & MENTORSHIP
Netflix Comes to Town:
Students Investigate Latin
American Media Industries

35

RESEARCH
One Billion Posts, One Election

56

IMPACT & ENGAGEMENT
Why Annenberg Matters
Video Series



Annenberg
SCHOOL FOR COMMUNICATION
UNIVERSITY of PENNSYLVANIA



LETTER FROM THE DEAN

It is a joy to welcome you to the second edition of *Connections: A Year @ Annenberg*. When we launched this magazine last year, our goal was simple — to share the remarkable work of our students, faculty and alumni with a broader community. The enthusiasm and encouragement we received from you affirmed what we know to be true: Annenberg has always been more than a place. It is a community engaged in understanding and reshaping the world.

In this year's edition, we highlight the innovative research that defines Annenberg. You will find new stories of discovery, impact and collaboration across our four central research networks: Health Communication; Politics, Policy, and Institutions; Cultural Inquiry; and Computational Social Science. These four areas remain essential to our mission, and together they represent the breadth and vitality of our work.

We are also excited to share more information about the launch of a major new initiative: the **Master of Communication and Media Industries (MCMI) program**. It builds on the legacy of our original master's program, which trained hundreds of accomplished professionals and scholars who continue to shape the field of communication in meaningful ways.

This past year has also been one of both challenge and possibility. Many of the subjects we study — including race, sexuality, gender and health outcomes — are at the center of public scrutiny and debate. Through it all, our mission to explore communication in all its power, to stand for academic freedom and to care deeply for one another with intention and purpose continues to endure.

Earlier this summer, we lost a dear friend and guiding light, Wallis Annenberg. Her passing is a profound loss. But her work in altruism, social justice and public service continues to inspire us. Using communication as a force for dignity and connection, we will carry her vision forward.

I am proud to share this second edition of *Connections: A Year @ Annenberg* with you. Whether you are a student, alum, colleague or friend, I invite you to explore these stories, celebrate the accomplishments of our community, and join us in championing communication as a powerful force for understanding and change.

Warmly,

Sarah Banet-Weiser

Walter H. Annenberg Dean and
Lauren Berlant Professor of Communication

“ In this year’s edition, we celebrate and highlight the innovative research that defines Annenberg. ”



CONTENTS



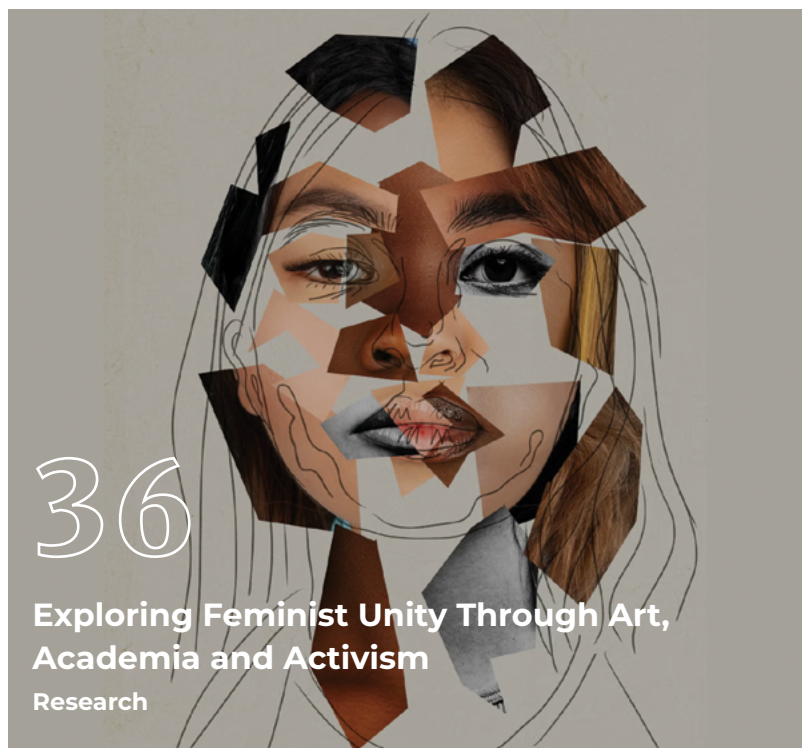
24

**Undergraduates Explore
Research With Real World Impact**
Teaching & Mentorship



46

**Cellphones in Schools: A Crisis or
a Connection?**
Research



36

**Exploring Feminist Unity Through Art,
Academia and Activism**
Research

NEWS & AWARDS

06

- 11 Health Communication Scholar David Lydon-Staley Promoted to Associate Professor with Tenure
- 12 Student and Alumni Awards

TEACHING & MENTORSHIP

18

- 18 Penn Students Attend the Nominating Conventions in Extraordinary Political Times
- 20 Netflix Comes to Town: Students Investigate Latin American Media Industries
- 22 At the Crossroads of Media and the Environment — A New Course Explores the Impact of Communication on the Planet
- 24 Undergraduates Explore Research With Real World Impact
- 26 Intersections of Inquiry: Annenberg Postdocs Explore Ideas Across Disciplines

SPECIAL FEATURE

28

- 28 A New Journey Begins: Annenberg Launches Media Industries Master's Program

RESEARCH & INSIGHTS

32

- 33 AI Platforms Are Inconsistent in Detecting Hate Speech
- 34 The Zelenskyy Effect: Public Persona and the War Narrative
- 35 One Billion Posts, One Election
- 36 Exploring Feminist Unity Through Art, Academia and Activism
- 38 Why is Hollywood So Obsessed with Con Women?
- 39 How #ChristianTikTok Users Understand and Utilize the Platform's Algorithm
- 40 Introducing the Penn Center on Media, Technology, and Democracy
- 41 How News Coverage Distorts America's Leading Causes of Death
- 42 Studying Wikipedia Browsing Habits To Understand How People Learn
- 44 Researchers Use Augmented Reality to Encourage Pediatric Vaccination In Philadelphia
- 46 Cellphones in Schools: A Crisis or a Connection?
- 48 Fighting the Opioid Epidemic: Transforming Community Health and Social Connections in Rural Areas of the U.S.

IMPACT & ENGAGEMENT

51

- 52 Azsaneé Truss Makes New Knowledge
- 53 Annenberg-Designed Communication Tool Being Used for Global Pediatric Health
- 54 Alum Khadijah Costley White's Multimodal Research on Active Shooter Drills
- 56 Why Annenberg Matters Video Series

BOOKS

58

- 58 The Neuroscience of Choice, Change and Connection
- 60 Media and Propaganda in an Age of Disinformation
- 62 New Books from ASC Alumni

ALUMNI NEWS

64

- 64 Meet the New Members of the Dean's Advisory Board: Christina Lee and Michael A. Persaud
- 66 In My Own Words: Emerson Coleman

A YEAR @ ANNENBERG

connections

Dean: Sarah Banet-Weiser

Editor: Mandira Banerjee

Design and Cover Art: Daina Fuson

Copyeditor: Donna Burdumy

Contributors: Shaima Albugami, Jonathan Allan, Kelly Fernández, Erica Moser, Katie Rawson, Hailey Reissman, Meredith Rovine.

Photographers: Kyle Cassidy, Eddy Marengo, Eric Sucar, Yuan Yao.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY AND NONDISCRIMINATION STATEMENT

The University of Pennsylvania seeks talented students, faculty, and staff with a wide variety of backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. The University of Pennsylvania does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, sex, sexual orientation, religion, creed, national origin (including shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics), citizenship status, age, disability, veteran status or any other class protected under applicable federal, state, or local law in the administration of its admissions, financial aid, educational or athletic programs, or other University-administered programs or in its employment practices. Questions or complaints regarding this policy should be directed to the executive director of the Office of Equal Opportunity Programs; Franklin Building, 3451 Walnut Street, Suite 421, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6106; or (215) 898-6993.

Connections: A Year @ Annenberg is produced by the University of Pennsylvania Annenberg School for Communication, 3620 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104. Reproduction of these articles requires written permission from the Annenberg School.

©2025 by the Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania.

Please contact Annenberg at (215) 746-1798 or news@asc.upenn.edu to share your stories, class notes or updates.

STAY CONNECTED.

asc.upenn.edu

A photograph of an audience of diverse people clapping and smiling, likely at an awards ceremony. The image is partially covered by a blue and red gradient overlay in the upper half.

NEWS AWARDS



Amy Gutmann

Receives Yale Legend in Leadership Award

Penn President Emerita and former U.S. Ambassador to Germany Amy Gutmann was awarded the Yale Legend in Leadership Award in 2025.

The Yale Legend in Leadership Award was created in 2000 to honor current and former CEOs and university presidents who serve as living legends to inspire leaders across industries, sectors and nations.

Gutmann, the Christopher H. Browne Distinguished Professor of Political Science in the School of Arts & Sciences and Professor of Communication in the Annenberg School for Communication, was Penn's longest-serving leader, from 2004 to 2022. Named by Fortune as one of the "World's 50 Greatest Leaders" in 2018, Gutmann has a long history of championing global engagement, access to education and health care, public-private partnerships and innovative discoveries that save lives and propel economies forward.

She is a prize-winning scholar whose work spans a broad range of pressing public issues. Her publications and lectures explore themes such as democracy and education; the challenges of deliberation, compromise and diplomacy; bioethics and equitable access to healthcare; human rights and identity politics; and ethics within public affairs.



Kathleen Hall Jamieson

Named to New National Science and Technology Task Force

In 2024, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, the Elizabeth Ware Packard Professor of Communication and Director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center, was among 60 leaders in education, science, public policy, philanthropy and industry named to a new task force to produce a Vision for American Science and Technology (VAST).

The VAST task force was convened to develop a set of comprehensive policy recommendations to optimize the U.S. science and technology sectors for a safer, healthier, more prosperous world.

In 2025, the group released the vision, identifying several avenues to address challenges facing the United States' science and technology enterprise. The task force consulted with the U.S. government to ensure the policy recommendations are practicable, impactful and strategically crafted for meaningful implementation.

The VAST task force is an initiative of the Science and Technology Action Committee (STAC), a nonpartisan group of nonprofit, academic, foundation and corporate leaders working to strengthen U.S. science and technology. It is supported by the Simons Foundation, Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, Rita Allen Foundation and Paul G. Allen Frontiers Group.

Jamieson's research employs rhetorical analysis, surveys and experiments to understand campaign communication, the science of science communication and ways to blunt misinformation and conspiracy theories. She has authored or co-authored 18 books and cofounded FactCheck.org and its science-focused initiative, SciCheck.

(Left) Faculty members Sarah J. Jackson, Ph.D.; David Lydon-Staley, Ph.D.; Yphtach Lelkes, Ph.D.; and Sandra González-Bailón, Ph.D.



Sarah J. Jackson

Awarded 2025 Fellowship from the Institute for Advanced Study

In April 2025, Sarah J. Jackson, Associate Professor of Communication, was awarded a one-year fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Study (IAS), one of the world's foremost centers for intellectual inquiry.

Jackson, who is also co-director of the Media, Inequality, and Change Center, studies how media, journalism, and technology represent and are used by marginalized groups. Her research focuses on how communication from Black, feminist and activist spaces contributes to U.S. progress.

As a Fellow in the School of Social Science at IAS, she will consider how digital theory and African American history are interlinked — from ties between digital migration and the geographic mass migrations of African Americans to comparisons between online virality and the spread of early Black media, such as slave narratives. She will also explore the ways that racist pseudoscience was historically debunked in Black media and how this can inform how to fight disinformation now.

Each year, IAS welcomes more than 250 of the most distinguished scholars worldwide to conduct research at the renowned research institution in Princeton, New Jersey.

As an IAS Fellow, Jackson joins a prestigious group of scholars that includes 36 Nobel Laureates, 46 of the 64 Fields Medalists, and 23 of the 28 Abel Prize Laureates, as well as MacArthur and Guggenheim Fellows, winners of the Turing Award, and the Wolf, Holberg, Kluge, and Pulitzer Prizes.

Other Annenberg scholars who have received IAS Fellowships include Assistant Professors Juan Llamas-Rodriguez and Julia Ticona, who were 2023-24 Members in the School of Social Science.



Andy Tan

Recognized with Presidential Early Career Award for Scientists and Engineers

Andy Tan, Associate Professor of Communication and Director of the Health Communication & Equity Lab, received the 2024 Presidential Early Career Award for Scientists and Engineers (PECASE).

The awards are the highest honor the United States government bestows upon science and engineering professionals in the early stages of their independent research careers.

Tan's research examines the impact of marketing, media and public health messages on health behaviors and outcomes among diverse populations, including young adults, socioeconomically disadvantaged, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender populations. He has been published in many peer-reviewed journals, and his scholarship and work have been cited in The Philadelphia Inquirer, TIME, CNN, Reuters and The Wall Street Journal.

Established by President Clinton in 1996, PECASE recognizes innovative and far-reaching developments in science and technology, enhances connections between research and impacts on society, and highlights the importance of the advances for the nation's future.

"I am deeply honored to receive this recognition," Tan said. "This award reflects the collective commitment to advancing health equity through community-engaged research, from my dedicated research team members, community advisors, youth partners and my Annenberg colleagues. I'm grateful to share this accolade with them for inspiring me every day."



Dolores Albarracín

Awarded
BBVA Foundation
Frontiers of
Knowledge Award

Dolores Albarracín, Amy Gutmann Penn Integrates Knowledge University Professor, with appointments at Penn's Annenberg School, School of Nursing, School of Arts & Sciences, and Wharton School, was awarded the BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Award in Social Sciences in 2025.

Albarracín's research, a combination of basic and applied psychology, uncovers the impact of communication and persuasion on human behavior and the formation of beliefs, attitudes and goals. She has published six books and more than 200 journal articles throughout her career.

Albarracín is one of five recipients of the BBVA Foundation's Frontiers of Knowledge Award in Social Sciences, recognized for her research increasing "our understanding of how attitudes can be changed, particularly with regard to persuasive messages," the award committee says.

The BBVA Foundation, based in Spain, supports scientific research and cultural creation through grants, disseminates knowledge and culture, and recognizes talent and innovation through awards. The social sciences is one of eight Frontiers of Knowledge Awards categories, each of which comes with a 400,000-euro prize to be divided among the awardees.

"My research has been guided by the following questions: How do we change behavior through persuasion? When does persuasion begin with changes in convictions, and when does it end with changes in beliefs that originate in particular emotions? How can we promote exposure to messages audiences fear and resist?" Albarracín said. "Answering these questions involves identifying the psychological processes at play and producing policy recommendations that benefit society ... This international award will strengthen our motivation to make social science discoveries at a time when our research and funding are threatened by our government. It is a tribute to the work of my lab and the contributions of my colleagues who are winning the award with me."



Victor Pickard

Awarded the
C. Edwin Baker
Award from the
International
Communication
Association

Victor Pickard, Co-Director of the Media, Inequality & Change Center at the Annenberg School for Communication and the C. Edwin Baker Professor of Media Policy and Political Economy, is the 2025 recipient of the C. Edwin Baker Award for the Advancement of Scholarship on Media, Markets and Democracy.

The award is given annually by the Philosophy, Theory, and Critique and Communication Law and Policy Divisions of the International Communication Association (ICA) for scholarly and related work that has made a significant contribution to the development, reach and influence of scholarship on media, markets and democracy. Pickard shares the 2025 award with Pablo J. Boczkowski of Northwestern University.

Pickard, who named his endowed faculty position after Baker in 2021, focuses on the history and political economy of media institutions, media activism and the politics and normative foundations of media policy. His work is particularly concerned with the future of journalism and the role of media in a democratic society. He has authored or edited six books and published over 150 articles, essays and book chapters in leading scholarly journals, magazines and anthologies, and co-authored three major policy reports.

"This award is especially meaningful to me because Ed Baker is one of my intellectual heroes," Pickard told the audience while accepting the award at the 2025 ICA Conference in Denver. "His meticulous, empirically-driven argumentation for why media markets fail democracy remains unrivaled."

The Baker Award was established in 2010 through an endowed fund created from the estate of Professor C. Edwin Baker (1947-2009), who was the Nicholas F. Gallicchio Professor of Law and Communication at the University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School.



Yphtach Lelkes

Awarded 2025
Andrew Carnegie
Fellowship

Yphtach Lelkes, Associate Professor of Communication, was awarded an Andrew Carnegie Fellowship, one of the most prestigious honors in the social sciences and humanities, in 2025.

He is one of 26 fellows who received \$200,000 each to support research that seeks to understand how and why American society has become so polarized and uncover ways to fortify democracy.

Lelkes, who also co-directs the Polarization Research Lab and the Center for Information Networks and Democracy, studies how political attitudes form and evolve, focusing on public opinion, political psychology, and political communication. His project, "Rethinking Partisan Animosity as Strategic Identity Signaling," explores the idea that partisan hostility may not stem from genuine hatred, but rather from a calculated way people express their political identities, especially in environments shaped by social media, fragmented news sources and heightened political tension.

"I'm deeply honored to receive the Carnegie Fellowship," Lelkes said. "It's a meaningful recognition of my work on political polarization and a signal that society is taking this challenge seriously. I'm grateful for the time and support this fellowship provides, and excited to use it to understand better how we can bridge divides in an increasingly fractured political landscape."

To date, Carnegie has named almost 300 fellows, representing a philanthropic investment of more than \$59 million. The award is for a period of up to two years, and the anticipated result is generally a book or major study.

Other Annenberg scholars who have received Carnegie Fellowships include Professors Diana C. Mutz and Duncan Watts, and Associate Professor Sarah J. Jackson.



Health Communication Scholar **David Lydon-Staley** Promoted to Associate Professor with Tenure



Q&A

David Lydon-Staley was recently promoted to Associate Professor and received tenure at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

Ascholar of health communication, Lydon-Staley's work focuses on moment-to-moment and day-to-day fluctuations in brain, behavior, and interpersonal and media environments to provide insight into substance use, emotion dynamics and curiosity across the human lifespan. He leads the Addiction, Health, & Adolescence (AHA!) Lab at Annenberg.

On the occasion of this momentous milestone in his academic career, we asked him a few questions about his five years at the Annenberg School and what his research, teaching and mentorship look like now.

Q: How has your research evolved since you joined the Annenberg faculty in 2020?

As a developmental scientist by training, my research focuses on the interplay between biological, psychological and environmental layers of human experience. Since joining Annenberg, I like to think that my treatment of the environmental layer — particularly the media environments people inhabit — has become more nuanced. Drawing on insights from the field of Communication, my research on curiosity has evolved from foundational questions about what curiosity is and how it is practiced to more applied investigations of how people engage with online environments in their search for health information, for example. My research on emotion dynamics in everyday life now takes media exposure seriously, examining it both as a driver and a consequence of emotional fluctuations. I'm also extending this work into the

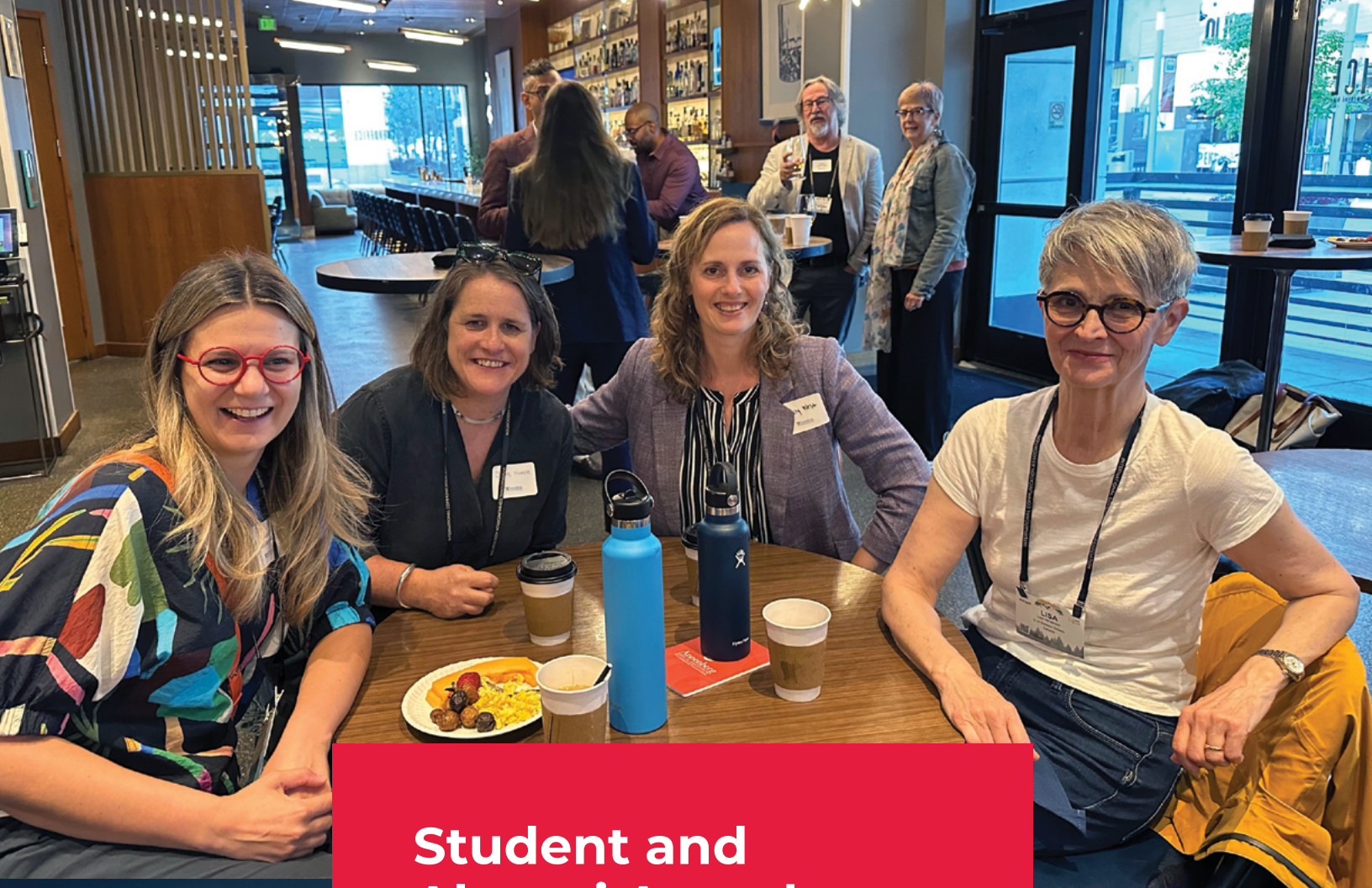
neuroimaging space by incorporating complex media stimuli, such as film clips, to better understand brain dynamics during cognitively and emotionally engaging moments.

Q: How do you approach working with students, including teaching and mentorship?

A tenet of developmental science that guides all of my work is the idea that "behavior is the leading edge of adaptation." In simpler terms, we grow and change most through what we do. This belief shapes both my teaching and mentorship. In the lab, students are active contributors from the start, diving directly into research design, analysis and interpretation. In the classroom, I emphasize hands-on learning — many of my courses include a data lab component where students engage directly with real data as they learn statistical concepts. Across all my courses, writing is central: students gradually build their abilities to articulate their ideas on the page and to revise in response to feedback.

Q: What are some of the research projects you're planning to pursue after tenure?

I'm taking time to step back and think about the big questions I'd like to tackle next. I'm increasingly interested in how curiosity functions in social contexts. For example, how much of what we choose to read is shaped by recommendations from friends, by the desire to have something engaging to talk about around the dinner table, versus the pursuit of what fascinates us on our own terms? I'm also eager to explore bridges between my academic research and my fiction writing. Lately, I've been thinking about the narrative strategies writers use to spark curiosity in readers and how readers respond to these cues.



Student and Alumni Awards



STUDENT AND ALUMNI AWARDS

2025 Sachs Program Grants

Doctoral candidates Lucila Rozas Urrunaga and Farrah Rahaman, and recent graduate Azsaneé Truss, were awarded funding for creative projects from the Sachs Program for Arts Innovation in April 2025.

They are among 20 members of the Penn community awarded grants this year. The Sachs Program supports innovative arts activities throughout the University of Pennsylvania community, providing funding to Penn faculty, staff, students, departments, programs and centers. The goal of the program is to ensure that the arts at Penn are valued and embraced as a creative catalyst, driving innovation, inspiration and action.



LUCILA ROZAS URRUNAGA

Urrunaga's project, "Contra-Archivx," is a transnational initiative that documents and amplifies the practices and narratives of trans/feminist resistance across Latin America.



FARRAH RAHAMAN

Rahaman's project titled "Palimpsest" is a short speculative film recounting the moment on the brink of deportation, in which visionary cultural organizer and writer Claudia Jones sets fire to her entire personal archive.



AZSANEÉ TRUSS

Truss's project, "What World?" is a curated group exhibition at The Arts League of West Philadelphia that reveals how artists (and society) are experiencing a surreal global political moment.

Awards at NCA 2025

National Communication Association's 110th Annual Convention November 21-24 in New Orleans, Louisiana

Doctoral student **SIM GILL**: Top Student Paper Award from the Economics, Communication, and Society Division

Recent graduate **AZSANEÉ TRUSS (PH.D. '25)**: Top Student Paper Award from the Critical & Cultural Studies Division

Awards at ICA 2025

International Communication Association's 75th Annual Conference June 12-16 in Denver, Colorado

Doctoral student **YIFEI LU**: Top Paper Award, Top Student Paper Award, and the John Garrison Memorial Award from the Interpersonal Communication Division.

Other Awards

Doctoral student **THOMONIQUE MOORE** was named a 2024 Penn Presidential Ph.D. Fellow.

Doctoral candidate **TOM ETIENNE** was awarded a UvA Alumni Impact Prize from the University of Amsterdam for his global voting advice tool.

Doctoral student **TEJAS HARAD** received a 2025 Summer Research Funds grant from Penn's Center for the Advanced Study of India.

Doctoral candidate **KATE OKKER-EDGING** won the 2025 James D. Woods Award for outstanding teaching.

(Left) Annenberg alumni, faculty and students at the International Communication Association's 75th annual conference.



NAIMA SMALL (C'25)

MAJOR: Communication with a concentration in Advocacy and Activism; minor in Africana Studies

HOMETOWN: Southington, Connecticut

POST-GRAD PLANS: Human Resources job rotation at Citi, and then law school

Even before arriving at Penn, Naima Small knew she wanted to major in Communication. “I applied to Penn because of Annenberg,” she said. “I was particularly interested in the concentration around advocacy and activism, subjects I was writing about in high school.”

As a teenager, she created an online blog, called “Dear Dark Skinned Girl,” that covered issues facing Black girls and women, from media representation to colorism. She continued her journalism career at Penn at 34th Street Magazine, winning Writer of the Year from the Daily Pennsylvanian in 2023.

“I’m proud to have been a writer and editor for 34th Street Magazine for most of my time at Penn,” she said. “As one of the few Black writers in the newsroom, I’m happy that I was able to add to the diversity of the stories that we produced. Street also helped me combine my interests in popular culture and social justice, and many of my articles were inspired by things I learned in my Annenberg courses.”

During her senior year, she was an undergraduate fellow with the Center for Media at Risk, where she spent her time meticulously researching and writing her honors thesis, which explored Black women’s online discussions of intraracial, gender-based violence through the hashtag #ProtectBlackWomen on Instagram.

Outside of the classroom, Small, a Benjamin Franklin Scholar, was involved in many student organizations at Penn, like Penn NAACP, the Communication Major Association and Carriage Senior Society.

What will Small miss most about Annenberg? “Being a part of such an engaging and vibrant academic community,” she said. “There are so many ways to study Communication — I have friends who are interested in health communication, others in marketing, others in scholarly research. I loved how Annenberg enabled me to not only see the diversity of ways I could use my degree, but also learn from people who had much different academic interests than me.”

As a newly minted grad, Small moved to New York City for a two-year job rotational program in human resources at global banking institution Citi, with future aspirations of attending law school.



XINYI WANG (PH.D. '25)

DISSERTATION: "Investigating Environmental and Biological Factors that Shape our Curiosity for New Information"

What if curiosity is the key to better public health communication?

That is a question that guided 2025 Ph.D. graduate Xinyi Wang through her doctoral research at Annenberg. In an information era flooded with noise, Wang believes that fostering curiosity may be one of the most powerful, and underused, tools we have to help people learn and recall health information — because if you're curious about something, you're likely to remember it.

As a member of Annenberg's Addiction, Health, & Adolescence (AHA!) Lab and the Communication Neuroscience Lab, Wang explored both the environmental and biological factors that underpin curiosity, as well as ways that health communicators could use curiosity to point people toward accurate health information. In the fall, she joined the Health Communication & Equity Lab as a postdoctoral fellow.

She is most passionate about efforts to encourage smokers to quit smoking. Curiosity, she's found, can help smokers learn and recall facts about the behavior, even when those facts point out that it's bad for you.

She became interested in curiosity in a health communication context while still an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. "As an undergraduate research assistant, I looked at how people's media switching experiences have an impact on their well-being, which made me realize I am very passionate about understanding the human experience related to media and communication," Wang said. "Curiosity is an essential experience in our day-to-day knowledge consumption and media experience, yet little is known about how and why."

Wang chose to pursue a Ph.D. at Annenberg "because of the amazing research portfolio and the significant research impact people at the School are making

on the world," she said. "I felt very inspired by the work taking place there, particularly in the realm of communication science and health communication."

As a postdoctoral fellow at the School, Wang is continuing to research the potential for using curiosity to create more effective messaging. Most recently she led a study that covered how educational messages about nicotine that spark a person's curiosity are better at reducing nicotine false beliefs than typical educational messages that simply state facts about nicotine.



NICK BAUSENWEIN (C'25)

MAJOR: Communication; minors in Consumer Psychology and English

HOMETOWN: Eatontown, New Jersey

POST-GRAD PLANS: Professional figure skating, then a position in children's media

Communication major Nick Bausenwein had already begun his career as a professional ice skater before he arrived on Penn's campus. Two weeks after graduating high school, he joined a traveling show and performed along the West Coast from summer 2019 to March 2020.

"I had signed on for another year; then COVID happened, and obviously, no shows were happening, so I emailed admissions, and I was like, 'Wait, please let me back,'" he said, laughing. Penn did, and he started college with virtual classes that fall.

The following semester, Bausenwein returned to tour while taking a full course load of asynchronous classes, then took another gap year to tour before returning to Penn.

On campus, Bausenwein co-led the Penn Figure Skating Club and discovered a love for children's media. Taking Annenberg senior lecturer and advisor Kim Woolf's Children and Media course proved a turning point in the narrative arc of his life.

"I got introduced to a lot of the opportunities that exist within children's media development, some on the creative side and some on the research side, seeing how kids learn," he said. "I saw the

impact that quality kids' media can have and how important it is."

Through the Annenberg in Public Service program, Bausenwein did an internship at the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) — working with kids' content, seeing the research that goes into it, and learning how PBS measures programming to ensure it is helping kids.

He wrote an honors thesis about how children feel about in-person meet-and-greets with film characters.

He plans to skate professionally for a bit longer after graduation, but then wants to work in children's media. He said the internship "gave me a lot of hands-on experience with exactly what I want to do. It was such a dream come true."



SHENGCHUN HUANG (PH.D. '25)

DISSERTATION: “Illusions of Echo Chambers: (Mis)perceptions about Personalized News Environments and Political Consequences”

When 2025 Ph.D. graduate Shengchun Huang arrived at Annenberg, she brought with her a journalist’s instinct for storytelling and a growing curiosity about the hidden forces shaping the stories people see.

Now, she leaves with a new framework for understanding how algorithms shape our digital news consumption and how perceptions of our personal news diets might affect democracy itself.

Huang, who grew up in Beijing, China, didn’t plan to be an academic; she wanted to be a reporter. “I liked investigating questions and figuring out how things worked,” she said. After earning a B.A. in communication from Renmin University and an M.A. in journalism and communication from Tsinghua University, she began working as a journalist. But she soon found herself frustrated with the pace.

“When I worked in journalism, I was not satisfied with the production process,” she recalled. “We always had a deadline. And sometimes I would think

to myself, ‘Okay, there’s still something I’m not sure about in the evidence I’ve accumulated.’ But I had to write the story anyway.”

A mentor at the newspaper noticed her frustration and encouraged her to consider a Ph.D. program, where she could explore complex questions with more time and depth.

Around that time, a new app called Douyin, China’s version of TikTok, was surging in popularity. Huang was struck by how the platform changed the way news was delivered. “It overturned the logic of traditional journalism,” she said. “Instead of editors curating the news, algorithms created personalized timelines for every user. That’s when I realized how powerful algorithms could be.”

She was drawn to study at Annenberg to learn from scholars already diving into how algorithms affect news, politics and polarization. “When I looked into Annenberg, I not only heard about the rich theoretical foundation built by pioneers in communication, but also respected their spirit of pursuing scientific knowledge

rigorously,” she said. “I was nurtured here. I grew as a scholar.”

Her dissertation introduces a new theoretical concept: the perceptions of personalized news environments. It explores how people perceive both their own algorithm-driven media bubbles and those of others — and how those perceptions might shape political attitudes and social trust.

“We know that people think media is biased,” Huang said. “But I want to push further: we also have perceptions of the ‘overall media environment’ we live in. Each of us lives in a siloed media space shaped by our preferences and by algorithms. I want to understand how people perceive those environments — both their own and others’ — and how that affects things like political polarization and partisan hostility.”

In August 2025, after completing her degree at Annenberg, Huang started a new chapter as a tenure-track assistant professor at the University of Texas at Austin.



& TEACHING MENTORSHIP

Penn Students Attend the Nominating Conventions in Extraordinary Political Times

Eight days after completing a summer internship at CNBC's breaking news desk, then-fourth-year Penn student Isabel Engel flew to Chicago to attend the 2024 Democratic National Convention. There she met Rep. Nancy Pelosi during a taping of the "Politics War Room" podcast, had a conversation with Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz, and told Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro how his 2022 campaign inspired her to get involved with voting in Philadelphia.

“I grew up right outside D.C. and both my parents have worked on Capitol Hill in various capacities, so I’ve experienced politics for much of my life,” said Engel, who graduated with degrees in Communication and Political Science this May, “but the energy at the [DNC] was unlike anything I’d ever experienced.”



sessions featured journalists, political scientists and other experts, and marked the first time the two Annenberg schools partnered for the conventions.

After mentioning that she got a picture with NBC journalists Savannah Guthrie and Kristen Welker, Collins commented that being exposed to the journalism industry “and seeing that live, with the expertise of our professors and our students, was just so formative and made me really proud of all the work I’ve done at Penn.”

Institute for Public Service Director David Eisenhower and lecturer Marjorie Margolies, a former broadcast journalist and Democratic congresswoman, have been taking Penn undergraduate students to the Democratic and Republican conventions every presidential cycle since 2000 — except for 2020, due to the COVID pandemic — as part of their Conventions, Debates, and Campaigns course. This past election cycle, Craig Snyder, former chief of staff to Republican U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter and president of the World Affairs Council of Philadelphia, joined the teaching team.

“We are the only university that does this; the only one anywhere,” said Eisenhower. He says he loves seeing students come alive while having an experience he had at their age. In 1968, at age 20, he attended the Republican nominating convention for Richard Nixon, his soon-to-be father-in-law. Eisenhower had first met the nominee’s daughter, Julie Nixon, at the 1956 convention, which had re-nominated his grandfather, Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Thirteen Penn students taking the class attended the DNC, and six went to the RNC in Milwaukee, including then-fourth-year Communication majors Isabel Sweeney and Elizabeth Collins.

“It was a very interesting experience through and through. It was also interesting timing: it happened two days after Trump got shot, and there was a lot of heightened security, said Sweeney. Collins chimed in, “Heightened everything. Heightened rhetoric, heightened passion.”

Collins said that most mornings, the students attended panels organized by Eisenhower in collaboration with the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. These

Having grown up and gone to school in “a bit of a bubble,” Sweeney said the reaction to Trump’s first appearance at the convention one of the event’s most memorable moments for her.

Afterwards, students wrote about and presented on various topics related to their experience, contextualizing it with data and other research. Lex Gilbert, a then-fourth-year majoring in Communication and Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies, who co-founded Penn’s Disabled Coalition, spoke about disability and accessibility. They explained that the 2024 DNC included the first ramp to the floor in convention history as well as sign language interpreters, and that halfway through the event, closed captions moved from side screens to the main screen.

“I think my favorite thing about Annenberg,” Engel said, “is the hands-on experience and the experiential learning that you gain, whether it’s from a professor like Al Hunt who literally teaches from journalistic experience, or Eisenhower and Craig and Marjorie...I think going to the convention was an incredible way to continue that hands-on experience and see, oh my gosh, this is what a degree in communication can really do for me.”





Teia Hudson

Netflix Comes to Town: Students Investigate Latin American Media Industries



Miraya Geshev

In 2020, following a steadily growing presence in Latin America, Netflix announced it would officially base its regional operations in Mexico City. Since the middle of the twentieth century, however, the capital of Mexico has been a central hub for the production of telenovelas, newscasts and variety shows. Televisa, the largest broadcasting company in the country, located in the Santa Fe neighborhood of Mexico City, has remained a powerhouse of Spanish-language content, creating shows that have traveled the Americas.



BUT NOW THAT NETFLIX IS IN TOWN, HAS ANYTHING CHANGED?

A course taught last semester by Annenberg Assistant Professor Juan Llamas-Rodriguez, titled *Before Netflix: The Past and Present of Latin American Television*, asked that question — whether streaming platforms like Netflix have (or have not) disrupted the longstanding practices of the Latin American television mediascape.

Students read economic, social and cultural studies of television, while keeping a journal about their own watching habits. Excitingly, the class ended with a trip to Mexico City, where students were able to visit television studios, including Televisa.

“[This class] was a foundational learning experience on the history of television and its intercultural and political implications in Latin American media,” said third-year English and Communication major Luiza Louback Fontes. “Traveling to Mexico and engaging directly with studios and professionals made the class even more immersive, giving me a deeper understanding of how television is both produced and consumed across borders.”



WATCH THE MEXICO TRIP

“Studying television means learning about the changing practices of watching television. While nowadays we are used to the binge model popularized by Netflix, in class we aimed to replicate historical modes of viewership,” said Llamas-Rodriguez

Alongside reading scholars like Stuart Hall, students participated in innovative classroom activities before they even left Philadelphia. One class had them split into groups and provide subtitles for a scene from a Spanish-language show. The exercise not only taught them how to use subtitling software but also sparked interesting discussions about the act of translation.

Students were also asked to watch telenovelas, shows many grew up watching with their families, and to keep a journal while they did it. However, they were instructed to watch the shows in a way that’s unfamiliar for many undergraduates: only one episode a day. And if they missed a day, they missed the episode, as if it was airing on the television of the past — a stark contrast to today’s Netflix viewing habits, which often emphasize binge-watching and “ambient” viewing.

“Studying television means learning about the changing practices of watching television. While nowadays we are used to the binge model popularized by Netflix, in class we aimed to replicate historical modes of viewership,” said Llamas-Rodriguez about the assignment. “Many students observed how quickly the telenovela became part

of their daily routine and how this familiarity increased their investment in the series — an insight that audience reception histories demonstrate was central to the popularity of early television.”

In mid-May, students set off to Mexico to see the industry they had studied all semester long. The trip included visits to five Mexico City studios, several of which had contracts with Netflix. Students met with producers, acting students, special effects supervisors, and diversity and inclusion consultants, and saw sets, post-production workshops and even a few active productions.

One of the producers they met with, Pedro Ortiz de Pinedo, specialized in “youth telenovelas,” a genre that, despite its focus on young audiences, still leans on the same formulas telenovelas have used for decades. Students were eager to learn how these shows are being written in the twenty-first century, while still maintaining the familiarity of the shows they grew up on. Moments like these combined the interests of students hoping to pursue careers in the industry after graduation and those who were simply curious to gain a broader understanding of Latin American television. The trip offered valuable lessons and opportunities for both groups.

“I grew up watching telenovelas, and taking this class gave me the chance to critically analyze a medium that had always been part of my life,” said Louback.

This course, one of the first for Annenberg, was a Penn Global Seminar. It combined intensive semester-long study with a short-term travel component fully sponsored by Penn Abroad.



At the Crossroads of Media and the Environment — A New Course Explores the Impact of Communication on the Planet

POSTDOCTORAL FELLOWS MATT PARKER AND ENNURI JO LED STUDENTS IN A SEARCH FOR THE INTERNET BEYOND SCREENS.

It's a cold afternoon in February at an electronic waste processing facility in Grays Ferry, Philadelphia. Students from the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania walked around a warehouse full of discarded laptops, televisions, chargers, fax machines, smartphones, and other electronics ready to be recycled. Lithium-ion batteries are being prepared for shredding, while hard drives are wiped of data.

This field trip is part of the Annenberg course, “Media, Infrastructures, and the Environment,” which had undergraduates explore the relationship between humans, media technologies, and the environment. From satellite networks and fiber-optic cables to the idea of “the cloud,” students explored how media infrastructures shape — and are shaped by — the planet’s resources and ecosystems.

On a bus to the facility, Communication and Philosophy major Gabriel Jung (C’26) held his camera, ready to document the trip. He said the course led him to start thinking about all of the infrastructure behind the internet that he previously overlooked, from underground cables to data farms.

“By looking at the electronics we all discard, students see first hand the impact of media technology on the environment,” said Gilbert Seldes Multimodal Postdoctoral Fellow Matt Parker, who co-taught the class with Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication Postdoctoral Fellow Ennuri Jo. “This one facility alone processes two million pounds of e-waste a year. As humans, we’re always trying to tell stories, but what we use to tell those stories, from televisions to ChatGPT, has different impacts on the natural world.”

Philadelphia as a Living Laboratory

This trip was just one of many that students took during the fall semester. Students also made the Penn campus their classroom, identifying the internet infrastructure in University City and making a map of the internet beyond screens. On a tour of campus guided by Jo and Parker, Communication major Reed Farrell (C’26) pointed out a manhole cover marked with the word “COMMUNICATION,” and added a point on the classroom’s shared Google Map, an atlas of internet infrastructure on campus. These covers usually point to the presence of underground fiber-optic cables, Jo told the class.



“We often think of network society and media technologies as immaterial, but they very much have a material presence and are deeply entangled with the natural and manmade environment,” Jo said. “The trip was meant to see how the actual components of media infrastructures are embedded in our immediate surroundings and literally shape our daily life at Penn.”

During the outing, the group climbed to the roof of a parking garage to search for antennas powering satellite connections, observed a massive cooling tower for chilling electronics, and stopped outside of the Bell Telephone Building, a granite-facade 1920s building once home to one of the famed company’s telephone exchange systems. The building now houses servers owned by Verizon. Parker invited students to get close to the door and listen to the sounds of the data center.

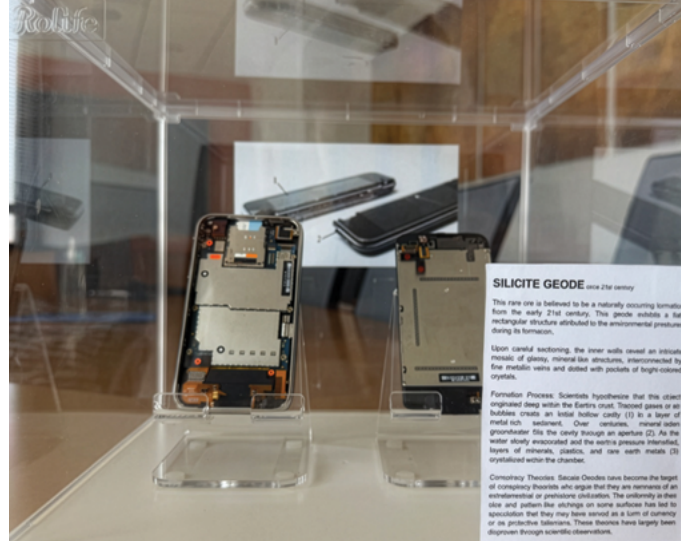
For Parker, an environmental humanities and sound studies scholar, the noise of these machines is the latest in a timeline of sounds of communication in Philadelphia.

“Philadelphia is a city built on communication,” noted Parker. “From colonial printing presses to the first computers and telephones, this city has always been shaped by media — and the materials that support these devices.”

Thinking and Making

Midway through the semester, Parker taught students how to solder electromagnetic listening devices, so that they could tune into the sounds made by 5G mobile networks and other communications infrastructure that they cannot hear with just their ears.

“In our course, we tried to give students sensorial and embodied access to infrastructure,” said Parker. “When we solder circuits to listen to electromagnetic fields, they don’t just learn about infrastructures — they sense them. This hands-on engagement turns abstract ideas into lived experience, revealing how our digital lives ripple through and reshape the material world.”



The course culminated in a creative multimodal project: students imagined their hometown or the city of Philadelphia transformed into a new environment, whether that was a different type of climate, submerged underwater, or something else entirely. They were instructed to imagine what this new environment feels like, how it operates, and what kind of infrastructure is in place. Each student designed a creative work that conveyed a vision for future media in that environment.

Students blended words, illustrations, physical artifacts, and more to create their projects. Jung’s final project was a teardown of an iPhone, presented as if it were an archaeological museum artifact in the future, while Urban Studies major Anna Hochman (C’25) created a zine titled “Fogged in: life in the nebulocene” about life in a future San Francisco where the fog never lifts. Communication and Public Health double major Cassandra Owei (C’25) made a website that exposes the environmental impact of everyday internet and technology usage, with designs that interrupt the user experience.

A New Frontier in Communication Studies

The course compelled students to investigate the world around them and consider how this world is affected by the communication tools we use, from the materials that make up our phones and computers to the resources used by server farms and data centers, and even the noise of a connected city.

“It’s imperative for students to understand how the way we communicate affects the environment we live in,” Parker said. Jo agreed: “We’re living in a world where we’re constantly connected, and that has an impact on our planet.”

(Top Left) Anna Hochman’s final project. (Top Right) Gabriel Jung’s final project.



Undergraduates Explore Research With Real World Impact



(Top) Members of Andy Tan's Health Communication & Equity Lab. (Bottom) Penn undergraduates, Seyoon Chun (C'25) and Kyle Grgecic (C'26).

Under the mentorship of Associate Professor Andy Tan, students are spending their summers tackling public health issues.

For the past four years, Associate Professor Andy Tan has spent his summers mentoring undergraduates interested in health communication research. Students from Penn and other universities work on projects in Tan's Health Communication & Equity Lab, contributing to the lab's ongoing research on improving public health, from using artificial intelligence for good to curbing nicotine use among LGBTQ+ youth.

In the summer of 2025, Tan collaborated with Annenberg research associate Matthew Brook O'Donnell to jointly mentor Sophia Szreck de Sousa Pereira, a sophomore at Case Western Reserve University who is interested in the study of human behavior, its influences and developing tools for improving decision-making.

O'Donnell and Tan are creating an AI platform to help Philadelphia-based community health organizations streamline their programming. As part of her internship, Pereira helped plan a workshop in which ambassadors from these health organizations beta tested the platform to create materials advertising their services, plan potential staff retreats, and brainstorm potential mission statements.

Pereira was excited to see the research in action.

"It's one thing to test the platform and think about the ways it could be used and helpful to people," she said. "It's another thing to actually see how people work with it, and how they slowly start to see how useful this could be for their organization in the future."

LGBTQ Youth and Tobacco

A year earlier, Tan worked with two Penn undergraduates, Seyoon Chun (C'25) and Kyle Grgecic (C'26), on a project addressing tobacco use among LGBTQ youth. Grgecic explored the strategies used by LGBTQ social media influencers to promote health and well-being, and Chun dove into the intersection of religion and tobacco use among the LGBTQ community, an understudied topic that he hopes future researchers will use to inform health communication strategies.

The pair was drawn to the lab's research because it felt both relatable and meaningful.

"I've seen some of my closest friends, members of the LGBTQ community, fall victim to nicotine addictions from as early as 14 years old," said Grgecic. "Nicotine use within the young LGBTQ community is abundant and under-researched, so it's truly an honor to be involved with the research that is going on."

Chun agreed. "I think a younger version of myself would be so happy to see what I'm doing now," he said. "Being able to research the sexual and gender minority population seemed impossible to me in the past, and the second I saw the lab's research, I knew I wanted to help out."

After their internships, Chun and Grgecic entered the 2024-2025 academic year with a solid foundation in academic research and the knowledge that they had contributed to work that has the potential to make a real difference in the lives of LGBTQ youth.

Tan is proud of the work that all his undergraduate mentees have completed over his summers as a faculty mentor.



Andy Tan

"It is really gratifying to mentor undergraduates in summer programs," Tan said. "Students engage lab members in learning about paths in research and get a flavor of what a career in communication research looks like: it's an excellent way to introduce students to how health communication research can contribute to improving population health."



Intersections of Inquiry: Annenberg Postdocs Explore Ideas Across Disciplines

Early-career scholars at Annenberg find inspiration in the intersections between their research, from the working conditions of journalists to the environmental costs of urban development.

At the Annenberg School for Communication, postdoctoral fellows are at the heart of the school's intellectual ecosystem.

Despite being the smallest school at the University of Pennsylvania, Annenberg hosts around two dozen postdoctoral fellows every year. These early-career scholars not only advance groundbreaking research but also forge connections across the school's many centers and labs, shaping the future of communication scholarship in the process.

Walk down the halls of Annenberg, and you might overhear a conversation breaking down the neuroscience behind climate change action, or a debate about political polarization and its effects on democratic institutions. You might hear someone analyze how ideas of feminism show up in TikTok videos or how contemporary film portrays national borders. Many of these discussions are led by the School's vibrant community of postdoctoral fellows, and often their conversations lead to unexpected connections.

In the spring, eight of these postdocs brought their research to ignite these kinds of cross-disciplinary conversations at a colloquium co-hosted by five different centers at the School: the Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication, the Annenberg Center for

Collaborative Communication, the Center for Media at Risk, the Center on Digital Culture and Society, and the Media, Inequality & Change Center.

Opening the event, Vice Dean Emily Falk praised the work that these early-career scholars do — from their time in the classroom, teaching and mentoring students, to their pursuit of research that expands the field of communication.

"This colloquium is a celebration of the curiosity and depth and creativity that define scholarship at Annenberg," she said. "The conversations that begin here today have the potential to shape new ideas, new collaborations and new directions of research here at Annenberg — and to define the field."

After watching a presentation by George Gerbner Postdoctoral Fellow Cerianne Robertson, a researcher who examines the social costs of urban development, Jeanna Sybert (Ph.D. '24), a postdoctoral fellow at the Center for Media at Risk, said she will think about her own research differently.

Robertson spoke about her work exploring the human and environmental costs of mega-arenas — drawing from her interviews with members of communities facing displacement when these stadiums are slated to be built in their neighborhoods. Sybert shared her research on the working conditions of journalists, a topic she's been investigating since she first arrived at Annenberg as a student. Her recent work examines the risks journalists face on the job, from reporting outside during hurricanes to attending protests, and how these risks shape news work as a whole.

“My research typically centers events — analyzing the sensemaking and discourses around them — rather than specific places and physical structures, so what caught my attention was how Cerianne started from a single material point (the stadium) and traced the network of sites, stakeholders and relationships that both emerge from and constitute this central node,” she said. “Seeing Cerianne’s approach made me realize we’re both looking at layers of connection, just with a different orientation and emphasis ... [A]s I’ve been thinking more about mobility in journalism lately, this approach could enhance my understanding of the physical spaces where news ‘happens’ going forward.”

Alyssa Sinclair, Joan Bossert Postdoctoral Fellow at the Annenberg Public Policy Center and the Penn Center for Science, Sustainability, and the Media, didn’t present at the colloquium, but says that interacting with other postdocs at Annenberg has enriched her research.

Annenberg, the postdoctoral program insists that research is richer when pursued in community.

“Postdoctoral fellows at Annenberg are doing research at the cutting edge of our field,” he said. “And in a moment marked by deep cynicism about research and higher education, a colloquium like this is a vital affirmation of the importance of coming together to share ideas and insist that the work we do matters.”

This intellectual network doesn’t thrive by chance. Each week, postdoctoral fellows come together in a writing group led by Eszter Zimanyi, research director at the Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication. Zimanyi’s group offers dedicated time for writing, peer feedback, and informal mentoring — creating a supportive space that sustains the fellows’ momentum and fosters collaboration across projects and centers.



Emily Falk



Cerianne Robertson



Aswin Punathambekar

“I am a cognitive neuroscientist by training, and before coming to Annenberg, I had never interacted with a community of communication scholars,” she said. “I love that others at the school share my passion for applied research that helps to address some of the biggest societal challenges we are facing today. Being a postdoc here has introduced me to people who share my research interests but apply different methods and theoretical perspectives. I’ve heard from other researchers that the postdoc period can be quite lonely, as postdocs move to new places for transient positions and often have few peers. Thankfully, I did not experience this at Annenberg.”

Since its founding in 2013, the Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication has hosted over 20 postdocs from around the world. Director Aswin Punathambekar emphasized how essential these scholars are to sustaining a vibrant academic community: He said that academic research can sometimes be solitary, yet at

Across centers, disciplines, and methodologies, Annenberg’s postdoctoral fellows are shaping what communication means in the twenty-first century. Their work — rigorous, creative, and deeply engaged with the world — reflects the School’s commitment to research that not only studies communication but transforms it.

A New Journey Begins

Annenberg Launches

Annenberg Launches Media Industries Master's Program

Annenberg's story at the University of Pennsylvania started with professional education. When the School opened its doors in 1954, its very first offering was a Master's in Communication — a program that, for nearly half a century, trained students who went on to thrive in business, media, nonprofit leadership and academia. The program was last offered in 2000, but its spirit never left the School.



Now, 25 years later, Annenberg is reimagining this legacy for a new era.

“Our goal with the new Master of Communication and Media Industries (MCMI) is to cultivate leaders who are not only prepared to navigate today’s dynamic media industries, but who also think expansively, ethically and globally about their future,” said Sarah Banet-Weiser, Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication. “By bridging theoretical inquiry with professional practice, we are shaping the future of media leadership.”

Rooted in Annenberg’s tradition of academic excellence and public impact, this master’s program will offer a blend of rigorous research, critical inquiry and applied practice to address current challenges and innovations in the media ecosystem. It will give students the tools to thrive in a wide range of careers across the media industry, from strategic communication and journalism to media analytics and content development.

As Annenberg prepares to open applications for the inaugural class in the fall, Aswin Punathambekar, Associate Dean for the Master’s Program, is leading the course development. “The curriculum is designed to resonate with both seasoned and early career industry professionals and students interested in the media industries, and our goal is to give them the analytic and methodological tools they need to navigate a fast-paced media world,” he explained.

At the heart of the curriculum will be two core courses introducing key theories, frameworks, and methods for understanding the workings of various communication and media industries. Students will then take electives to delve deeper into specific topics, develop an original case study as part of the research capstone and present their work to a panel of industry leaders. Core courses and electives will help students apply a range of humanistic and social scientific theories, concepts and methods to the everyday operations of media industries around the world, while the proseminar and capstone project will provide the space for experimenting and developing ideas that can transform the media world.

“Above all, we are committed to an ethically and critically engaged approach to the study and production of media,” added Punathambekar.

A connection with the industry and the renowned Annenberg alumni is a defining feature of the master’s program. Amanda Lotz, professor at Queensland University of Technology, is working with Punathambekar to shape the course of study, and both are intent on weaving Annenberg’s strong alumni network into the curriculum.

“Annenberg has an incredible community of graduates who remain deeply connected to the School,” Lotz noted. “We want to bring them into the classroom as thought partners, mentors and collaborators, so the students are learning in conversation with leaders in the field they are about to enter.”

One of those alumni is Randi Michel, head of the New York office of management-production company Artists First. Michel began her career in the William Morris Agency mailroom, rose to become a partner at talent and media agency WME, and now serves as a manager and producer. Her trajectory reflects the kind of career pathways MCMI hopes to prepare students for, and she is already helping to shape its development.

Students will have opportunities throughout their studies to learn directly from leaders like Michel, as well as from other experts in the media and entertainment industries. These interactions will deepen classroom learning while opening doors to future careers.

“Annenberg helped me find my place in the industry, and I’ve never looked back,” said Michel. “I want to give back and make sure that the next generation of students has the same opportunities.” →



“Annenberg helped me find my place in the industry, and I’ve never looked back. I want to give back and make sure that the next generation of students has the same opportunities.”

– Randi Michel



“Annenberg has an incredible community of graduates who remain deeply connected to the School.”

– Amanda Lotz

When the first cohort arrives in fall 2026, its students will form an intentionally small, tight-knit community — one that will facilitate mentorship, collaboration and individualized academic support, preparing its graduates to thrive in the fast-moving and globally connected media world of the decades ahead.

Master's Alumni On Their ASC Experience

Adrienne Becker, M.A.C. 1994

CEO, Level Forward



ASC was the place to go if you were curious about systems of democracy, participation, and communication. I have used so much of what I learned [at Annenberg] in my role at Level Forward, and throughout my career.

My thesis was about the value of intermediaries in communication systems – specifically, the press in elections. To this day, the training, resources and commitment of information professionals clearly prove that AI will only get us so far.

Being able to break down problems and questions in society and culture and policy requires theoretical frameworks and, more specifically, the practice of thinking through theories in order to get to practical solutions. I really do believe that. I hope it is helpful advice for those considering their options.

Tom Newman, M.A.C. 1975

Multimedia Producer



When I graduated in 1975, there was no job for me, which was a big disappointment. After a couple of years, the Metropolitan Museum of Art contacted me about a tenure-track position that would use

all my abilities. This was basically my dream job at that point, and I stayed at the Met for 10 years.

A chance to work on a project to create the first livestreamed, interactive, distance learning science program at the Met was irresistible. This occupied me for over two years, was very successful, and led to virtually my only industry job, heading the interactive practice at a major public relations agency. My clients were multinational corporations launching their first online identities.

There is no question that the Annenberg master's degree as a credential was crucial to my being hired by the Met. No doubt it was helpful for subsequent jobs. However, my success in those jobs was largely due to how Annenberg shaped my intellect. I had learned to think in a profoundly different way. I always had ideas; at Annenberg, I learned how to articulate, refine and translate them into useful forms.

Bill Novelli, M.A.C. 1964

Retired CEO, AARP



As soon as I graduated from Annenberg with a master's degree, I began 11 months of sales training with Unilever. I left Unilever to move to a hot Madison Avenue ad agency, Wells Rich Greene. But my accounts

weren't exciting, and my big problem was facing a career without social relevance. Then the agency assigned me to a new account — public television, to build an audience. My first step was to go to a press conference presided over by [television writer and producer] Joan Ganz Cooney. She told the media that public broadcasting was about to transform children's TV education with a new program: "Sesame Street."

This made me realize I could apply marketing skills for social impact marketing. Jack Porter (1955 Wharton graduate, another émigré from Madison Ave.) and I left the Peace Corps to start our own company, Porter Novelli. Our idea was to apply what we knew — marketing and marketing communications, to health and social issues. Today, Porter Novelli is one of the world's foremost global public relations agencies and part of [global media, marketing and communications company] Omnicom. We were pioneers in what became social marketing.

I eventually left Porter Novelli to become Chief Operating Officer at CARE, the big international relief and development NGO and then left CARE to become the CEO of AARP, the largest nonprofit in America, with some 40 million members.

We had a great run in my tenure, and I “retired” from AARP to join the faculty in the McDonough School of Business at Georgetown University, where I taught in the MBA program for over a decade.

My Annenberg experience was foundational. My undergrad and master’s experiences shaped my career start, my communication skills and my life. I would tell undergrads and those in the early stages of their careers to very seriously consider enrolling. A master’s degree in communication — especially at Penn — can open doors and provide opportunities for successful careers.

Darryl Sragow, M.A.C. 1968

Political Strategist, Attorney



I was on the radio even before I arrived at Annenberg. And after completing my master’s, I was the news person for WAMS Wilmington and WFIL Philadelphia. After that, I moved back to California and formed

a partnership to build a radio station on the Monterey Peninsula.

During the Vietnam War, I served as a naval officer stationed at the Pentagon. And after that I entered politics by managing a congressional campaign in Muncie, Indiana. That led to jobs back in Washington D.C., including with the Committee on Veterans Affairs.

I’ve had a long career serving as campaign manager in California, including three campaigns for governor, and two for the U.S. Senate. I then served as the chief campaign strategist for the Assembly Democratic Caucus, reporting directly to the Speaker. I have also managed a number of school and community college bond campaigns. I would say that the skills I learned at Annenberg have allowed me to thrive in many different professions — as a communicator, as a lawyer and also as a campaign manager.

Communications is undergoing change at breakneck speed now. I can say with confidence that the master’s program at Annenberg will help students decipher it and provide the skills in an academic setting that can be used in life.



Q&A

Q&A with Aswin Punathambekar, Associate Dean for the Master’s in Communication and Media Industries

ASWIN PUNATHAMBEKAR is professor of communication at the Annenberg School for Communication and director of the Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication. He is also Associate Dean for the Master’s in Communication and Media Industries (MCMI). We sat down with him to learn more about the program.

Q: Why launch a Master's program now?

Media and communication industries are among the most powerful institutions in the world today, shaping virtually every aspect of social, cultural, political, and economic life. Rapid technological advances are transforming how media are produced, distributed and consumed. Global interconnectivity has expanded both opportunities and challenges, from transnational collaborations to global propaganda and misinformation networks. At the same time, industries need professionals who can navigate evolving ethical, social and economic pressures. Launching an MA program now responds to this critical moment, preparing leaders to shape, not just react to, today’s communication landscape.

Q: Who should consider joining this new program?

This program is designed for aspiring and mid-career professionals who want to lead in media, communication and related industries. We would love to work with recent graduates seeking advanced preparation, practitioners aiming to deepen their expertise, and those transitioning from fields like business, political science and public policy, literature and film studies, and arts and nonprofit leadership. Put simply, anyone driven to understand and shape the social, cultural and technological forces transforming media and communication today will find this program invaluable.

POLITICS, POLICY, AND INSTITUTIONS

AI Platforms Are Inconsistent in Detecting Hate Speech

Associate Professor **YPHTACH LELKES** and doctoral candidate **NEIL FASCHING** found dramatic differences in how large language models classify hate speech, with especially large variations for language about certain demographic groups.

With the proliferation of online hate speech, which can increase political polarization and damage mental health, leading artificial intelligence companies have started to release large language models (LLMs) that promise automatic content filtering.

“Private technology companies have become the de facto arbiters of what speech is permissible in the digital public square, yet they do so without any consistent standard,” said Associate Professor Yphtach Lelkes. A lack of comparison between these models raises questions about arbitrariness, bias and disproportionate harm.

He and Annenberg doctoral candidate Neil Fasching examined these models and produced the first large-scale comparative analysis of artificial intelligence-powered content moderation, publishing their study in Findings of the Association for Computational Linguistics.

“The research shows that content moderation systems have dramatic inconsistencies when evaluating identical hate speech content, with some systems flagging content as harmful while others deem it acceptable,” Fasching said. Lelkes noted that “these inconsistencies are especially pronounced for different demographic groups, meaning some communities are left far more vulnerable to online hate than others.”

They analyzed seven models: the dedicated moderation endpoints from OpenAI and Mistral, in addition to Claude 3.5 Sonnet, GPT-4o, Mistral Large, DeepSeek V3, and Google Perspective API. Fasching says that while platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and X don’t clarify which models they’re using, it’s “highly likely” they’re using or seriously considering these or similar systems.

Their analysis includes 1.3 million synthetic sentences — generated using a full factorial design — that make statements about 125 distinct groups. Each group falls into

the category of race, ideology, religion, disabilities, specific interest, gender, level of education, sexual orientation, age or occupation. Descriptors of the groups include both neutral terms and slurs.

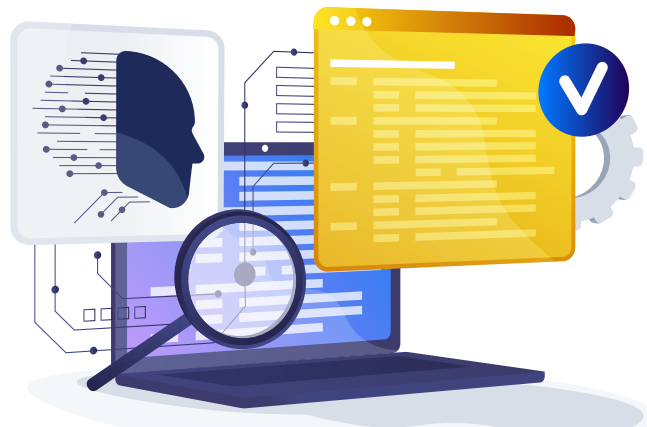
Each sentence combines the quantifier “all” or “some,” a group, and a hate speech phrase. Some also contained a “weak incitement” to hostility or exclusion or a “strong incitement” to harm.

Fasching and Lelkes found that evaluations across the seven systems were more consistent for sexual orientation, race and gender, while inconsistencies intensified for groups based on education, interest and class. Classification of statements related to Christians also varied widely across platforms.

The researchers found that the Mistral Moderation Endpoint was most likely to classify material as hate speech, OpenAI’s Moderation Endpoint demonstrated less consistent decision-making, and GPT-4o and Perspective API showed the most measured approach. “These differences highlight the challenge of balancing detection accuracy with avoiding over-moderation,” they wrote.

A minority of the 1.3 million sentences generated were neutral or positive, to assess both false identification of hate speech and how models handled pejorative terms in non-hateful contexts, such as “All [slur] are great people.” The researchers found that Claude 3.5 Sonnet and Mistral Moderation Endpoint treat slurs as harmful regardless of positive context, whereas other systems seem to prioritize the overall sentiment.

Fasching and Lelkes are expanding their research by comparing these LLM-based moderation results to human perceptions of hate speech. They’re also investigating differences in hate speech detection based on whether the content includes calls to action or incitement of violence, allowing them to compare performance to U.S. legal definitions of unprotected speech.



(Top) Yphtach Lelkes
(Bottom) Neil Fasching

The Zelenskyy Effect: Public Persona and the War Narrative



Annenberg's **LIZ HALLGREN** analyzes Western media's fascination with Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the early months of the Russia-Ukraine war.

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy — and his background as a comedian and actor — dominated headlines in the Western press. His viral social media posts: a flurry of self-filmed videos in the streets of Kyiv, differed from the PR typically associated with heads of state and captured the hearts and minds of journalists and audiences alike.

In a paper published in *Media, War & Conflict*, Liz Hallgren, a doctoral candidate at the Annenberg School for Communication, analyzed how journalistic coverage — specifically the genre of the profile piece — during the early months of the conflict reinforced the president's self-branding as a “scrappy underdog turned brilliant military mind,” encouraged readers to sympathize with Ukraine and revealed mainstream media's fixation on dramatic, individualized storytelling.

“Just weeks after the invasion began, TikTok hashtags related to Zelenskyy already had over 350 million combined views, and one of his own videos, posted to Telegram, garnered over 5 million views in the span of one week,” she wrote. Profile journalism latched onto his viral self-produced storytelling, amplifying and legitimizing his virality online by translating it to legacy media settings.

Zelenskyy's virality and uptake in the mainstream Western press can't be separated from his carefully curated persona of “Marlboro-esque masculinity,” she noted. His performance as a leader who stands by his troops, wears fatigues and T-shirts, and talks to everyday people in peril acutely aligns with Western myths of resilience and leadership. It is his unique ability to tap into those ideals that spurred the feedback loop between Zelenskyy and journalists, facilitated by a symbiosis between genres of social media and profile storytelling.

“I hope my research encourages us to take the political work of the profile piece — a genre often brushed aside as ‘human interest’ seriously,” Hallgren said. “Profiles authenticate their subjects; in this case, Zelenskyy emerges legible, believable and proximate. We should ask ourselves why and how. What kinds of stories do our media institutions naturalize as truth? That's what attention to journalistic genre can help us answer.”

“Clearly, profile reporting on Zelenskyy hasn't translated to a victory for Ukraine in its over three-year struggle with Russia,” she said. “The question at play here isn't if Ukraine deserves Western support, but rather, how certain kinds of reportage play a role in making some crises legible to Western publics more than others.”



zelenskiy_official.v 🇺🇦🇵🇸🇪🇺 @zelenskiy_official
@olenazelenska_official 🇺🇦🇵🇸🇪🇺

#zelenskiy #zelenskiy_official #zelenski #zelenskyy
#volodymyrzelenskiy #volodymyrzelenskyy #volodymyr
#volodymyrzelenskyy #volodymyrzelenskiy #ukraine
#ukrainewar #ukraina_blog #ukrainian_insta #ukraine_blog
#standwithukraine #prayforukraine

181w See translation



POLITICS, POLICY, AND INSTITUTIONS

One Billion Posts, One Election

Annenberg School Professor **SANDRA GONZÁLEZ-BAILÓN** and colleagues analyzed the spread of over one billion Facebook posts to reveal how information flowed on the social network.

The 2020 U.S. presidential election took place amidst heightened concern over the role of social media in enabling the spread of misinformation. Facebook's part was particularly concerning, given previous worries about its impact on the 2016 election.

In a study published in the journal *Sociological Science*, Annenberg School for Communication Professor Sandra González-Bailón and colleagues analyzed over one billion Facebook posts published or reshared by more than 110 million users during the months preceding and following the 2020 election.

"Social media creates the possibility for rapid, viral spread of content," González-Bailón said. "But that possibility does not always materialize. Understanding how and when information spreads is essential because the diffusion of online content can have downstream consequences, from whether people decide to vaccinate to whether they decide to join a rally."

The research team paid particular attention to whether political content and misinformation spread differently from other content on the platform. They also examined whether Facebook's content moderation policies significantly impacted the spread of information.

They found that Facebook Pages, rather than individual users or Groups, were the primary drivers of content distribution on the platform, as their posts reached large

audiences simultaneously. However, misinformation spread mainly through direct user-to-user sharing, suggesting an enforcement gap in the platform's content moderation when it came to user-transmitted messages.

"A very small minority of users who tend to be older and more conservative were responsible for spreading most misinformation," González-Bailón said. "We estimate that only about 1% of users account for most misinformation reshares. However, millions of other users gained exposure to misinformation through the peer-to-peer diffusion channels that this minority activated."

The research highlighted three paths by which content made its way to a user's Feed on Facebook during the 2020 election.

One involved content flowing directly from friends. The second was from Pages, the typical mechanism for celebrities, brands, and media outlets to share content.

The third is Groups, which users join to connect to other users.



"We estimate that only about 1% of users account for most misinformation reshares."

Content shared via friends, Pages, and Groups generates different propagation patterns, which the researchers mapped using "diffusion trees," representations of the width and depth of information sharing. In addition to these patterns, the researchers also analyzed the reach of that propagation, or the number of people exposed to a given post. →

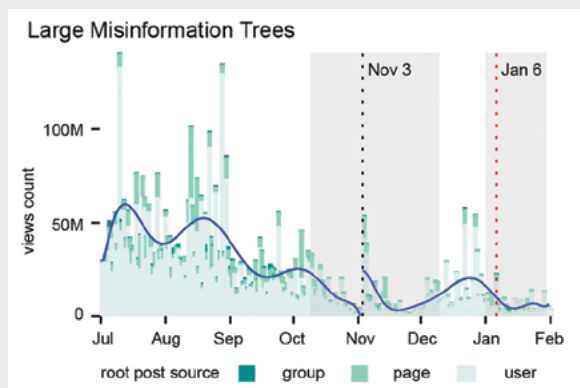
One Billion Posts, One Election (cont.)

“Most people online are lurkers, which means that most users view but rarely produce or reshare content,” González-Bailón said, “so merely calculating the number of reshares doesn’t show the whole picture of what happens on social media. That’s why we looked at exposures, that is, the number of views a given post or message accumulated.”

During the study period, Facebook employed emergency measures that intensified its content moderation. These measures were known as “break-the-glass” because, as the name implies, they were designed to respond to extreme circumstances and mitigate heightened risks, like the “Stop the Steal” campaign that erupted immediately after the election. The researchers found that periods of high-intensity content moderation were generally associated with drops in information propagation and exposure to misinformation, specifically. These drops indicate the influence that content moderation efforts may have at crucial junctures, including the moments when those efforts are rolled back.

Social media platforms are evolving rapidly, adopting AI and other emerging technologies. With these changes comes the potential for misinformation to spread in new ways, along with opportunities to discover more effective ways to curtail it. According to González-Bailón, platforms should collaborate with external researchers to understand these changes and assess the effectiveness of their content moderation policies.

“The ability to control information flows gives much power to platforms, and this power should not be exercised outside of public scrutiny,” she says. “The public can only assess how effective platforms are in their content moderation efforts through publicly shared data and analyses.”



WATCH SANDRA DISCUSS HER FINDINGS



CULTURAL INQUIRY

Exploring Feminist Unity Through Art, Academia and Activism

A recent symposium and art exhibit at Annenberg examined the growth, maintenance, and challenges of feminist solidarities in our interconnected world.

In the last decade, a media-friendly, flashy “popular feminism” has gained traction — spread through hashtags, advertisements, television shows, and even global superstar Beyoncé’s single “***Flawless,” which sampled Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TEDx Talk, “We should all be feminists.”

Though popular feminism has introduced a new generation to feminist theory, it can often overshadow the everyday work of feminist groups that work both online and offline to fight gender-based discrimination and violence, far-right populism, and systemic attacks on the rights and bodily autonomy of women and gender-diverse individuals around the world.

In September 2024, scholars, artists and activists gathered at the Annenberg School to explore how feminist groups communicate, create culture, critique and imagine new forms of transnational feminist solidarity and connection. The two-day Transnational Feminist Networks Symposium was organized by a collective of Annenberg doctoral students — Cienna Davis, Sim Gill, Valentina Proust, and Lucila Rozas — and supported by the Annenberg Center for Collaborative Communication, the Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication, and the Center on Digital Culture and Society.

The conference featured a keynote address by Srila Roy of the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg; a conversation with artist Sonia E. Barrett; three panels exploring the past, present and futures of transnational feminist networks; and “Present Futures: Experiments

(Left) Result Chart from the Facebook study. (Top) “En la garganta, la pena” by Romina Chuls.



in Feminist Futurity,” an art exhibit organized by the students, which featured art by Davis, Gill, Rozas and recent graduate Azsaneé Truss, among other artists. Panels included discussions of transnational feminist networks in Bangladesh’s Red July, digital feminist activism in Spain, the popularity of the Korean 4B movement on English-language TikTok, and more.

It was important to the student organizers to include the voices of those outside the academy in the symposium. Organizing an art exhibit was one way to do that. “As five scholars who embody feminist principles in both our research and personal lives, curating this exhibit provided a unique opportunity to foreground art as a powerful medium for dialogue and a site for reimagining belonging within academic spaces,” said Gill. Rozas felt the same: “We recognized the importance of giving proper space to forms of knowledge transmission that are rarely considered authoritative in academia, especially knowledge from outside of the U.S. and other hegemonic settings.”

To stage the exhibit, students had to choose from over 60 submissions from feminist artists, ultimately selecting 10 artists to spotlight. “Part of the challenge was selecting pieces that, together, would not only complement each other aesthetically but also create a cohesive narrative around the theme, telling a story,” Proust said.

Truss, Davis, Rozas, and Gill contributed their own artwork to the exhibit, and attendees also participated by adding to a collaborative collage that evolved over two days.

Associate Professor Sarah Jackson moderated panel two of the symposium — “Connections: Media, Technology, and Transnational Feminist Networking” — and was impressed by the students’ work.



“Working with the graduate student organizers of the Transnational Feminist Symposium was truly impressive. Their thoughtful decision to pair scholarly discussion and debate with an art exhibit exemplified the power of multimodal engagement,” she said. “The exhibit not only deepened the symposium’s intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic impact, but also opened space for community-building and public outreach.”

Putting together the exhibit and symposium was not an easy feat, but Rozas believes their effort was worth it. “For me, one of the most important things about the exhibition is that it showcases, in different ways, different visions of what enacting the present in the future means and how there are connecting threads in the forms we think about it, which is what, ultimately, allows a feminist transnational project to flourish,” she said.

Davis hopes to see more multimodal symposia at Annenberg. “I hope the exhibition encourages other grad students to consider the benefit of their artistic practices to their scholarship and to know there is space for this kind of work to be received at Annenberg,” she said.

“I think art can encourage deeper engagements with the topics that are being discussed at a symposium. During a traditional symposium, you listen, take notes and perhaps ask questions, but the exhibition offers a space and time for contemplation and reflection that a talk cannot provide. It invites the participants to engage with the messages using all their senses, offering a more embodied experience,” said Proust.

(Top Right) Azsaneé Truss, Cienna Davis, Valentina Proust, Lucila Rozas, and Sim Gill.

Why is Hollywood So Obsessed with Con Women?

Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kathryn Claire Higgins examine how the shows “Inventing Anna” and “The Dropout” reflect a post #MeToo society.

In the last few years, television shows about con women have been popping up on streaming services. From Apple TV’s “Hollywood Con Queen” to Hulu’s “The Dropout,” audiences clearly have a thirst for stories about female scammers.

But why is the “confidence woman” such a hot topic right now? Feminist scholars Sarah Banet-Weiser, Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication, and Kathryn Claire Higgins, lecturer in Global Digital Politics at Goldsmiths, University of London, examined this in their paper, “Liars, Scammers, and Cheats: Con(fident) Women and Post-Authentic Femininities on Television,” published in the *Journal of Gender Studies*.

According to the researchers, these series reflected broader societal anxieties about gender, race and capitalism at a time when women’s believability is under intense scrutiny in the wake of movements like #MeToo and #TimesUp.

“Television is not just reflective of gender and culture, but it is also crucial in creating cultural norms of gender,” said Banet-Weiser.

The paper highlighted two recent and widely discussed fictionalized portrayals of female con artists: Anna Delvey (“Inventing Anna”), who posed as a wealthy heiress to con New York’s elite, leveraging confidence and artifice to gain access to high society, and Elizabeth Holmes (“The Dropout”), the disgraced founder of Theranos, whose charisma and ambition were used to manipulate investors, echoing the aspirational, yet hollow narratives of the “girlboss” archetype.

Banet-Weiser and Higgins argued that the stories of Delvey and Holmes served as backlash against the popular #girlboss feminism that dominated the 2000s, encouraging women to equate financial success with female empowerment and to be confident at all costs. They argued that the two shows serve as moral tales that warn of the dangers of investing trust in the “con(fident) woman.”

The shows are, in this way, a kind of backlash, not against second-wave feminism, but rather, against popular feminism and its entanglement with both whiteness and capitalism.

Banet-Weiser also sees this kind of backlash in a very different media form: the online visibility of “tradwives,” short for “traditional wives.” “The online performances of tradwives of a nostalgic, highly stylized femininity are framed as a romanticized mode of retreat from a broken system — the same system that nourishes con women,” she said. “Unlike con women, tradwives surrender to dominant norms of gender; they explicitly do not resist them. Their portrayals of earnest, domestic femininity can be positioned as a foil against the con woman, who wants what men seem to be granted — fame, fortune, independence.”

Both Banet-Weiser and Higgins point out the importance of noting that these stories are gaining popularity when women’s believability is being questioned en masse after the #MeToo movement, which emboldened them to come forward with accusations of sexual violence. What’s more, both Delvey and Holmes are white, and their perceived “believability” is deeply tied to the privileges of whiteness.



CULTURAL INQUIRY

How #ChristianTikTok Users Understand and Utilize the Platform's Algorithm

A new study reveals the different ways an online religious community negotiates their place in a digital space.

New research from doctoral student Sara Reinis and alum Corrina Laughlin (Ph.D. '18) analyzed over 500 videos from Christian TikTok users to investigate the phenomenon of spiritual conceptualizations of social media algorithms.

Their paper, published in *New Media & Society*, reveals the different ways Christian TikTok users view their place on a platform that controls their visibility and the ways they interact with this hidden force.

Some see the TikTok recommendation algorithm as existing in an “unseen” realm. Subsequently, according to the researchers, some of the Christian imaginary surrounding the algorithm frames algorithmically determined visibility as a direct expression of God’s will.

For others, boosting the visibility of these videos, whether directed by the hand of God or not, is seen as a spiritual obligation. “This framing takes tenets of algorithmic optimization found in social media marketing guides and turns them into moral mandates in a grand landscape of spiritual warfare,” wrote Reinis and Laughlin in their co-authored article.

The potential to boost the visibility of Christian content to TikTok users through its algorithm is a feature that’s negotiated in different ways on Christian TikTok. Using the concept of “context collapse” on social media, Reinis and Laughlin showed how the “memefication” of their content by outsiders — for instance, when it reaches “the bad side of TikTok” where non-Christian audiences reside — can be an evangelizing opportunity. “It’s exactly why we’re here,” one TikToker says, “to be the light for the lost.”

However, Christian TikTok also sees the algorithm as an oppositional force. While some see it as a tool for spreading the word of God, others portray the platform as part of the broader “mainstream media” ecosystem, which they believe actively persecutes and suppresses Christians, the authors noted.

This, however, can help users frame their own spiritual brand: “If the worldly algorithm hates them, they must be on the right track, their thinking goes,” said Reinis and Laughlin.

Since the publication of the study, Reinis has continued to study religious content on TikTok. In a paper in the *International Journal of Communication*, “TikTok Is One Long Conversation With the Universe: How Platform Affordances Shape Emerging Spirituality Across TikTok Manifestation Content,” Reinis expanded her research into the platform and made the argument that manifestation content further reveals how the performance of spiritual beliefs is becoming enmeshed with new media technologies.

“After writing this first article, I was struck by how remarkably similar the discourse was in the New Age space. In addition to #ChristianTikTok, the tendency to spiritualize one’s encounters with the algorithm was also pervasive across ‘manifestation’ content,” she said. “Across these two case studies, a shared phenomenon became increasingly clear: the features of the TikTok platform are becoming thoroughly intertwined with our modern spiritual landscape.”



Sara Reinis



Because of this conditional believability granted to white women, Delvey, for example, can get away with not only pretending to be an heiress, but also avoiding looking like what she actually is — a criminal.

The trope of the con woman is a powerful, if ambivalent, allegory for the broader cultural anxieties of the 2020s, Banet-Weiser and Higgins argued. “Inventing Anna” and “The Dropout” are more than just critiques of Delvey’s or Holmes’s actions. They are parables dedicated to showing what happens when white women like them are believed too quickly and too lightly in our culture.

“These stories are more than entertainment,” Banet-Weiser said. “They demonstrate how society grapples with trust, power, and the limits of feminist progress in a capitalist world. With both the con woman and the tradwife achieving heightened media visibility in the past few years, it seems clear that independent women, feminism and any kind of righteous anger at gender and racial inequalities are a liability rather than a promise of a better future.”

Introducing the Penn Center on Media, Technology, and Democracy

The Center brings together six schools at Penn with \$10 million in support from the Knight Foundation and the University.

In September 2024, Penn announced the creation of the new Center for Media, Technology, and Democracy. The Center was conceived to propel research involving media, technology and democracy within Penn and to become a global hub for researchers, private sector leaders and policymakers by sharing research findings and creating near-real-time dashboards that provide a clear view of the current media landscape, informed by empirical research.

Professors Duncan Watts and Christopher S. Yoo (shown below) are co-principal investigators for the Center.

Watts, founding director of Penn's Computational Social Science Lab, is an empirical scholar whose research is marked by innovation. He is the Stevens University Professor and a Penn Integrates Knowledge Professor with appointments in Penn Engineering, Annenberg, and Wharton. Yoo, the Imasogie Professor in Law and Technology at Penn Carey Law, with a secondary appointment at Annenberg, is the founding director of the Center for Technology, Innovation, and Competition at Penn Carey Law.

"The United States and other countries around the world are living through a series of crises associated with a high level of affective polarization and diminishing trust in institutions. Increasingly, we are finding ourselves in different universes in terms of what we understand about

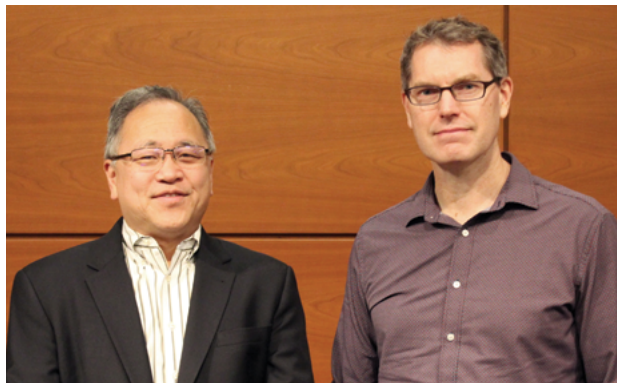


the world," said Watts. "But public discourse is limited to simplistic explanations of what's happening. Social media has a lot of data, but it is hard to get. Our approach will utilize a combination of AI methods applied to large data sets and behavioral experiments to uncover the prevalence, causes and consequences of misinformation and bias."

In May 2025, Alex Engler joined the Center as executive director. Engler comes to Penn after serving as Director for Technology and Democracy on the United States National Security Council and as a Fellow in Governance Studies at The Brookings Institution.

"The Penn Center for Media, Technology, and Democracy works to advance our collective understanding of the information landscape through cutting-edge science — and leverage that research to foster a more informed society and strengthen the foundations of democracy," Engler said. "Over the next year, the Center will launch a fellowship program and award grants for empirical research of the information ecosystem, and host a public event series and its inaugural flagship conference."

The Center will benefit from a five-year, \$5 million investment from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, with additional support from the Annenberg School for Communication and the Annenberg Public Policy Center, as well as Penn Engineering, Penn Arts & Sciences, the Wharton School, Penn Carey Law, and the School of Social Policy & Practice.



"Annenberg and Annenberg Public Policy Center's leadership and commitment to researching the impact of AI and other emerging technology on society and democracy are essential as we delve into these important topics as a community and develop programs and opportunities for our students, faculty and the community at large," said Sarah Banet-Weiser, Walter H. Annenberg Dean.



COMPUTATIONAL SOCIAL SCIENCE

How News Coverage Distorts America's Leading Causes of Death

A study by doctoral candidate Calvin Isch showed how media coverage of sensational risks underemphasized chronic illnesses.

Even though they receive minimal healthcare funding, chronic diseases are the leading cause of death in the United States. They account for 70% of deaths in the U.S. annually, with six in 10 Americans suffering from at least one chronic condition. However, coverage of this public health crisis is eclipsed by coverage of risks such as homicide and terrorism — incidents that are far more likely to grab readers' attention.

In early 2025, Calvin Isch, a doctoral candidate at the Annenberg School for Communication and a member of the Computational Social Science Lab, published a study that explored this bias and imbalance in media coverage. He found that the outlets covered tended to amplify sensational risks while underrepresenting chronic risks, highlighting a disparity between risks covered by the media and the mortality risks that statistically threaten Americans the most.

Using natural language processing techniques, Isch collected monthly data on 14 different mortality risks using keyword searches on 823,406 major U.S. news outlet articles that were published between 1999 and 2020.

Heart disease, which accounts for 36% of overall deaths, showed a ratio of one article per 323 deaths; in contrast, terrorism, which accounts for 0.00008% of overall deaths, had a ratio of 36 articles per one death alone, highlighting

that deadlier risks received less coverage when compared to their sensational counterparts.

In addition to comparing mortality risks and media coverage, Isch's analysis looked for mentions concerning health interventions to determine if bias manifested in other ways. He found that mitigation strategies fell under three main categories: policy, behavioral and technological. Articles on chronic diseases usually emphasized changes to individual behavior, while those on sensational risks focused more on collective policy solutions.

He also considered the tone of this reporting, showing that sensational risk coverage exhibited more negative emotions when compared to coverage of chronic diseases, which was covered more neutrally in tone.

This data, and the trends it illustrates, provide a useful framework for discussing how health communication can play a role in determining the quality of personal and public health, in addition to barriers such as economic factors.

Further exploring the media's impact on perceptions could help researchers better understand how these perceptions contribute to public attitudes and policy-making.



Studying Wikipedia Browsing Habits To Understand How People Learn

A collaborative team of researchers, including Annenberg Associate Professor David Lydon-Staley, found that gender and education inequality align with different types of knowledge exploration.

Have you ever been down a Wikipedia rabbit hole?

Annenberg Associate Professor David Lydon-Staley is one of a team of six researchers who recently examined the browsing habits of 482,760 Wikipedia readers from 50 different countries.

The study classified habits based on information acquisition styles, one example being “the busybody,” someone who has a preference for sampling diverse concepts, and a second example being the “hunter,” someone who undertakes a more targeted information search and becomes deeply immersed in a topic.

In the research, published in the journal *Science Advances*, Lydon-Staley, with Dani Bassett, Professor of Bioengineering and director of the Complex Systems Lab at Penn, and colleagues discovered stark differences in browsing habits between countries with more education and gender equality versus less equality, raising key questions about the impact of culture on curiosity and learning.

“We observed that in countries with greater inequality, particularly around gender and access to education, people tended to browse with more focused intent. In contrast, browsing was more expansive in countries with more equality and covered a wider diversity of topics,” said first author and Penn grad Dale Zhou. “While the exact reasons for why this is occurring are not fully clear, we have some strong hunches.”

This work builds on a previous study led by Lydon-Staley, in the Complex Systems Lab at the time, which asked 149 participants from Philadelphia to browse Wikipedia for 15 minutes a day for 21 days. “Beginning this line of work in a small sample allowed us to work out the methods needed to capture the complex information-seeking that accompanies curiosity,” Lydon-Staley said.

“Working out those methods then allowed us to scale up and ask whether we could confirm that the styles we observed could be found outside of our sample of Philadelphians.”

The team worked with Martin Gerlach of the Wikimedia Foundation, who had data of more than 2 million human browsers. That allowed them to apply their “existing methods, and develop new methods, to capture styles of curiosity emerging across 14 different languages of Wikipedia and 50 different countries or territories,” Lydon-Staley said.



The researchers cite three main hypotheses driving the associations between information-seeking approaches and equality.

“One is that it’s possible that countries that have more inequality also have more patriarchal structures of oppression that are constraining the knowledge production approaches to be more hunter-like,” said Bassett. “Countries that have greater equality, in contrast, are open to a diversity of ideas, and therefore a diversity of ways that we’re engaging in the world. This is more like the ‘busybody’ — the one that’s moving between ideas in a very open-minded way.”

A second possibility the researchers outline is that browsers visit Wikipedia for different purposes in different countries, citing how someone in a country with higher equality may go to the site for entertainment or leisure rather than for work.

Finally, the third possible explanation is that Wikipedia users in different countries may vary in age, gender,

socioeconomic status or educational background. These demographic differences could help explain the variations in browsing behavior across regions.

Looking ahead, the team aims to explore the motivations behind Wikipedia browsing, examining whether users are driven by extrinsic factors, like work, or intrinsic curiosity, like personal interest. Additionally, the team is currently expanding this work by capturing online health information-seeking, asking where people search for health information online and how this information-seeking influences health-related knowledge.

“Wikipedia is a very special place on the internet,” Lydon-Staley said. “The site



David Lydon-Staley



HEALTH COMMUNICATION

Researchers Use Augmented Reality to Encourage Pediatric Vaccination in Philadelphia

During the 2024 flu season, researchers from the University of Pennsylvania worked with members of the West Philadelphia community to co-create and test augmented reality (AR) health campaigns about pediatric vaccination. A study from the team shed light on how AR can be used to build trust among vaccine-hesitant members of the public and educate them about the importance of pediatric flu vaccines.

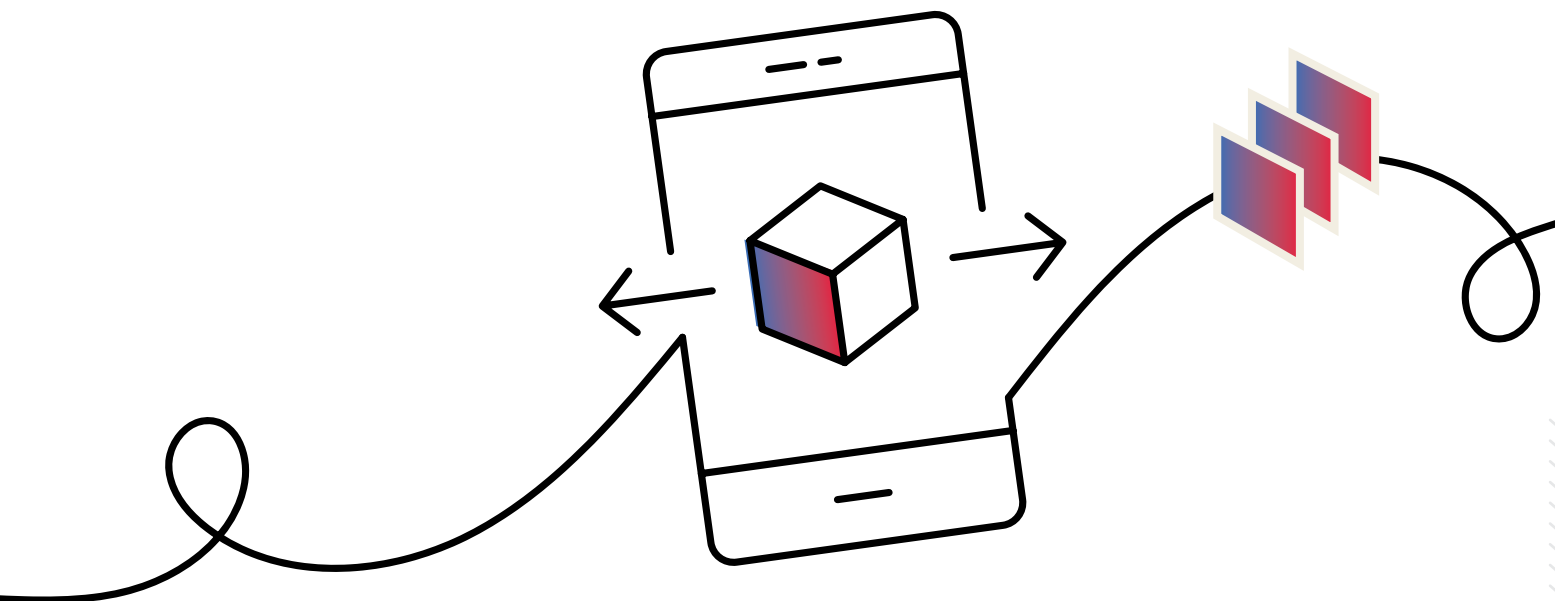
While both the World Health Organization and the American Academy of Pediatrics emphasize that childhood vaccines are thoroughly tested to ensure safety and effectiveness, misinformation circulates about pediatric vaccines in the public.

To build trust and encourage vaccination, a multi-disciplinary research team from the Annenberg School, Penn Nursing, and Penn Medicine worked with parents and guardians to share information and build community. The team from Annenberg included Associate Professor Andy Tan, doctoral candidate Kate Okker-Edging, and Extended Reality Lab co-directors Katerina Girginova (Ph.D. '19) and Kyle Cassidy.

With the help of West Philadelphians interested in educating friends and neighbors about childhood vaccination, the research team created posters and postcards printed with QR codes, leading users to different AR videos and experiences. When a person scans the QR code with their phone, the poster or postcard “comes alive” with a short video sharing the importance of pediatric vaccination overlaying the poster. Users can also access a map of the closest vaccination clinics based on their location.

Tan, director of the Health Communication & Equity Lab, was inspired to join the collaboration because of its commitment to community engagement, something he prioritizes in his work. “We sought community input iteratively from the beginning,” he said. “We learned so much from each of the parents who contributed their time and invaluable insights to help make sure the video content and format centered on the needs of Philadelphia residents.”

(Top) Testing augmented reality posters with West Philadelphia community members. (Right) Katerina Girginova.



The team spent over a year working with community members to develop and refine their messaging, from workshopping video scripts to choosing images on posters. “Pediatric vaccination remains an incredibly salient issue of health equity, so it is especially important to develop campaigns that meet the needs of the audience, in collaboration with the audience,” said Okker-Edging, a member of the Health Communication & Equity Lab whose research focuses on youth well-being. “It was a great experience to work with community members on script writing, filming and other aspects of the project,” she said.

Based on best practices from scientific research and community input the team created short, lighthearted videos that highlight the importance of pediatric vaccination and that feature many actors who are Philadelphia parents themselves. “We went with a humorous approach to our campaign because research shows that using humor helps to connect with vaccine-hesitant communities,” said Cassidy.

Multiple posters and postcards were created for each campaign and placed in different locations in Philadelphia. “Using augmented reality was a natural fit for the delivery of our content because it has the unique capacity to be

integrated within a person’s surroundings, adding to our efforts to connect with local communities,” said Girginova. Early findings indicated that the more credible, community-oriented and relatable the AR content, the more likely users were to feel a connection with it and place themselves within the scenario.

The researchers hope that this work will pave the way for more healthcare and public health communication initiatives and encourage researchers to consider how AR and other immersive technologies can be used ethically and effectively in public health messaging. “This process of co-designing a novel, engaging and community-centered approach to share health information with parents and residents will inform our future approaches for addressing other health crises,” Tan said.

“Our work with AR offers a framework for combining essential public health messaging with emerging technology in a hyper-local setting,” said Okker-Edging. “Beyond the campaign messages themselves, I am hopeful that our community-centered approach has led to strengthened relationships that will continue to benefit communities in West Philly.”



Girginova agrees: “We are continuing our research on augmented reality media because we see much potential in the way it can connect people, content and places in an effort to make messaging more personal, impactful and likely to inspire real action.”



Q&A

HEALTH COMMUNICATION

Cellphones in Schools: A Crisis or a Connection?

SAFELab Director Desmond Upton Patton provides insight into school cellphone bans and digital wellness for youth.

Whether students should or should not have cellphones in school has been a hot topic in the U.S. of late. Many educators and parents worry about how cellphone use can affect focus and mental health, with the potential to incite violence in school halls, but, at the same time, they want students to have a phone available in case of emergency.

Annenberg Professor Desmond Upton Patton studies how youth navigate the internet, including how they use cellphones to interact with their peers, express themselves and process grief, joy and loss online through his research center, SAFELab.



Q: Why do you think school districts in Pennsylvania and beyond are cracking down on cellphone use?

We are living in a moment where schools are struggling to figure out how to support young people in a digital world that moves faster than policy, research and practice. Cellphones are a powerful tool; they connect, entertain, educate and create, but they also distract, expose and harm. Schools are responding to real concerns: students distracted in class, the spread of violence and harmful content online, and the impact of social media on mental health. But banning phones outright isn't a solution; it's a reaction. If we want to address the real issues, we need to focus on education, support and responsible digital citizenship rather than just restriction.

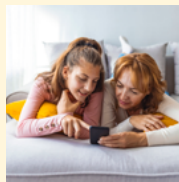
Q: What should parents and their community be doing to prevent the negative impacts of cellphone use?

Parents and communities need to be in active conversation with young people, not just about what they do on their phones, but how it makes them feel. We can't just police, we have to listen. When a young person is engaging with harmful content, we need to ask: What is drawing them to it? What need is it fulfilling? That's where intervention happens. Parents should be co-learning, exploring digital spaces alongside their kids, modeling healthy engagement, and setting boundaries that aren't just about control but about care. Schools, churches, community centers — these spaces need to be places where young people can talk openly about their digital lives without fear of punishment.

Q: How can cellphones be used positively?

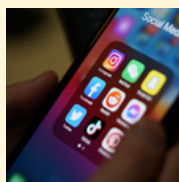
Cellphones are an extension of young people's identities, creativity and connection to the world. Instead of seeing them as distractions, we should ask: How can we harness their power for good? Young people are using their phones to build community, express themselves, document their lives and even organize for social change. They can be tools for mental health support, with access to wellness apps and peer support groups. They can be a gateway to learning — whether that's through YouTube tutorials, educational apps or digital storytelling. If we center intentionality, cellphones can be used to uplift, rather than harm.

Q: What are some guidelines for creating healthier, safer social media platforms?



Built-in digital well-being tools:

Platforms should have easy-to-use tools that help users track their engagement, set limits and take breaks.



Better content moderation with cultural nuance:

AI and human moderators must be trained to recognize the complexities of language, culture and context, especially when it comes to Black and brown youth.



Fostering joy and community:

Platforms should elevate content that promotes well-being, creativity and connection — not just what drives clicks and controversy.



Real-time intervention for harm:

When someone is engaging in harmful behavior online, there need to be real-time interventions, whether through community support or direct outreach from mental health professionals.



Youth-centered design:

Young people need a seat at the table when these platforms are built. We should be designing with them, not just for them.



HEALTH COMMUNICATION

Fighting the Opioid Epidemic: Transforming Community Health and Social Connections in Rural Areas of the U.S.

DOLORES ALBARRACÍN, the Amy Gutmann Penn Integrates Knowledge University Professor, has long studied how to curb disease and improve health.

Now, Albarracín, and her team in the Social Action Lab, a collaboration between the Annenberg School, the Annenberg Public Policy Center, and the School of Arts and Sciences, are working with people in the parts of the United States most vulnerable to HIV and Hepatitis C (HCV) infection spread — rural communities in Appalachia and the Midwest, the frontlines of the substance use and methamphetamine disorder epidemic.

In partnership with a network of leaders from state health agencies, county health departments, and local nonprofits in these areas, Albarracín, her research team and local community members have spent five years preparing and a year testing an intervention to promote HIV and HCV prevention, increase well-being and reduce the stigma of substance use in these areas.

Research That Reaches People

“When we first conceived of the research project, it began with the idea of creating a massive community advisory board to be connected with communities that were all affected by the substance abuse disorder epidemic,” Albarracín said. “That particular pattern of substance use was causing outbreaks of HIV in areas that had never seen anything like it. In 2015, an Indiana town went from fewer than five infections of HIV a year to around 190 a year. In these areas, the opioid crisis has been compounded by a lack of access to healthcare as well as social stigma, resulting in major health risks.”

The research was made possible by an Avant-Garde Award from the National Institute of Drug Abuse that Albarracín was awarded in 2019. The grant “supports exceptionally creative scientists conducting high-risk, high-reward research on HIV in the context of substance use and substance use disorders. The award encourages innovative approaches that could lead to new avenues for prevention and treatment of HIV.”

(Top) Community members in Appalachia discuss resources related to opioid use disorder.



After receiving the award, Albarracín and her team began to recruit advisory board members from regions most vulnerable to HIV and HCV infections: the rural Midwest and Appalachia. The team of leaders from these areas — called the Grid for the Reduction of Vulnerability (GROV) — advised on future research projects.

Albarracín and her team soon called upon the GROV board to help craft a social intervention to address the substance use disorder crisis and increase community well-being in these regions. The intervention lasted the course of a year, from February 2024 to December 2024. Throughout the year, groups of participants from regions represented by GROV met online over Zoom to craft individual social and health goals. Participants included both people who use substances and the community at large.

The goal was to foster connections between individuals and communities of people near and far. “Social connections can foster the right context for behavioral change, and help pave the way for better community health,” said Devlin O’Keefe, former research coordinator with the Social Action Lab. But social connections alone are not sufficient, so the intervention relies on setting and implementing goals with support from others, said co-investigator Man-pui Sally Chan, research associate professor at the Annenberg School. “By fostering social connections with intergroup discussions on health, participants seem to be more willing to share their health needs (regardless of their substance use status), better able relate to one another, and able to become more supportive within their networks,” she said.

These meetings were facilitated by eight members of the research team and GROV, and supervised by Marta Durantini, former Research Director at the Annenberg Public Policy Center. Additionally, the intervention

included a private social media platform created by the research team under the leadership of Chan. In this moderated, secure platform, participants and leaders could have conversations to support their personal goals. Participants could also request free HIV and HCV testing kits and Narcan from the research team. “Therefore, the intervention attempted to address the dearth of one-stop-shop comprehensive services in the rural counties,” Chan said.

Meeting People Where They Are, From Afar

“One of the benefits of having an online study is that it lets people in relatively isolated communities expand their social connections and reach out to people in communities who have very similar problems and can share different solutions,” said O’Keefe.

One participant from Virginia agrees: “I had the expectation that I would have nothing in common with these people from around the country, but I was really surprised at how quickly and how easily I was able to form connections with them,” they said.

“When we first conceived of the research project, it began with the idea of creating a massive community advisory board to be connected with communities that were all affected by the substance abuse disorder epidemic,” Albarracín said.

Working together, the study provided a platform for community members to support one another: “It was absolutely helpful in realizing that I could feel like I belong in a community, and not be some outsider,” said one participant. “Especially in more rural areas, you don’t really feel like you have that sense of community.



Dolores Albarracín

Realizing I can interact with these people that I might not necessarily know anything about made me start to realize that I can form new friendships. I can be a part of society again.” →



As the co-creator and supervisor of the intervention Durantini saw these types of changes first-hand.

“I was struck by how quickly people stepped in to help others with their problems and share their own, even with those who had been complete strangers just the day before,” she said.

“Across the more than 100 sessions I attended, I often heard participants say, with relief, ‘I appreciate everyone’s honesty and the fact that no one judges anyone.’ I watched as they discovered common ground with people whose lives were vastly different from their own — those who had never used drugs forming bonds with others striving to rebuild their shattered lives,” said Durantini.

Fred Wells Brason II is President and CEO of Project Lazarus, a nonprofit organization that provides training and technical assistance to communities and clinicians addressing prescription medication issues in Wilkes County, North Carolina. He is also the co-chair of the GROV Community Advisory Board.

As someone with decades of experience assisting community members struggling with addiction, Brason was happy to share his expertise with researchers. “In our community, we realized the only way to change the individual was to change the village. And that’s essentially what we did,” he said. “Not every community knows what to do around the issue, and to me, this research is an avenue to provide evidence-based ways to fight the opioid crisis.”

(Top) Fentanyl Test Strip. (Right) Gallery wall celebrating people in recovery.

What’s Next

The team has submitted the results of their Cluster Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT) testing of the program for publication (the outcomes are embargoed until publication). The goal is not just to understand what works, but to create a replicable blueprint for future efforts. “Additionally, we need to consider how to expand it for effective implementation by local nonprofits and other researchers,” Chan said.

For Albarracín and her team, this is a model for what community-collaborative research can look like: programs that work because they are co-created by the people they aim to serve. Its strength lies in its partnerships — between scientists and residents, health professionals and harm reduction advocates, and between Penn and the people living in some of the country’s most underserved areas.

“Communities are already ready for this, and I think what’s necessary next is funding for similar interventions that similarly harness the strengths of these communities to increase well-being,” O’Keefe says.

This is more than a research project to Albarracín — it’s a commitment to ensuring that the tools of communication research are used not just to understand human behavior, but to improve health, especially where the stakes are highest.

“I cannot comment on the intervention results yet, but this project is part of a decade focusing on understanding how behavior is regulated in social contexts,” Albarracín said. “Simply bringing people together is unlikely to produce changes without a social psychological understanding of how groups can help achieve personal goals.”

“This multifaceted intervention is likely to improve that understanding and bring together the psychology of self-regulations, the science of norms and communication processes,” concluded Albarracín.





& IMPACT ENGAGEMENT

200+

JOURNAL ARTICLES/
BOOKS PUBLISHED



50

ASC FACULTY &
STUDENTS
PRESENTED AT ICA



66

COURSES TAUGHT



108

EVENTS HOSTED



4,900

CUPS OF COFFEE
BREWED IN SUITE 200





Azsaneé Truss Makes New Knowledge

For a few months at Annenberg, the walls of the library were adorned with arresting collages thanks to recent Annenberg doctoral graduate Azsaneé Truss. Her dissertation, *Conspi(racism): Subversive Ideas in Black American Art & Media*, explored the same ideas behind an ongoing series of projects she has titled “The Conspiracy Mixtapes.”

The art exhibit — which included a series of 16 collages, magazines, vinyl records, books, posters, and other archival materials, and a soundscape — visually and sonically explored conspiracy theories within the Black public sphere. Utilizing a nontraditional academic form, Truss showed, along with her dissertation, how these conspiracy theories are grounded in critical understandings of racialized oppression.

In her dissertation, Truss outlined this argument by revealing how conspiracy theorizing among Black Americans is an ongoing exercise in anticipating and subverting white supremacist power.

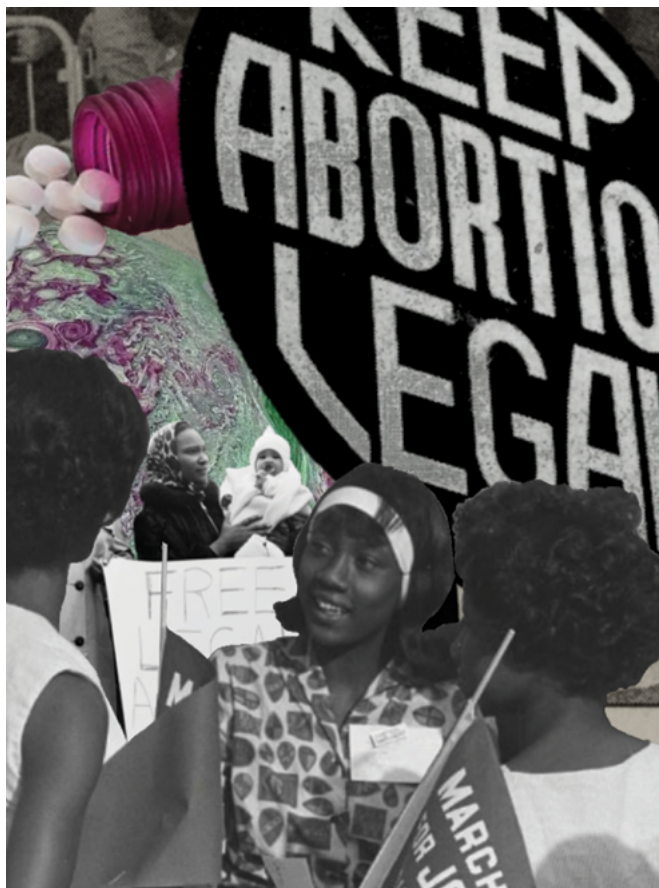
In addition to researching artistic and mediated expressions of conspiracy theories, she also engaged with several different mediums to make this argument.

“Multimodality is important to me not only as a methodological intervention, but also as an epistemological intervention,” Truss said. “What we know is fundamentally married to how we know. As multimodal scholarship takes seriously the plethora of forms knowledge can take, it opens us up to new ways of conveying our knowledge as well as new knowledges altogether.”

In addition to the library exhibit, “The Conspiracy Mixtapes” also includes a film that utilized interviews, archival research and a listening-party-as-focus-group to jump through time and document and reanimate critical perspectives theorizing the CIA-Contra-Crack Conspiracy — as well as a mixtape.

For Truss, her scholarly practice is inseparable from her artistic practice. “I see my art as thought, thinking as an art,” she said. By blending research, storytelling and aesthetic experimentation, Truss hopes to challenge dominant narratives and imagine new possibilities for sharing knowledge.

(Top & Right) Azsaneé Truss and her “The Conspiracy Mixtapes” exhibit.



Annenberg-Designed Communication Tool Being Used for Global Pediatric Health

Annenberg Hotkeys, the free, easy-to-use, interactive distance learning platform developed at the Annenberg School for Communication, is delivering results worldwide. Initially designed to train Penn Medicine students remotely during the first weeks of the COVID-19 lockdown, it has since been widely used to train people in remote locations around the world, for whom travel to learning centers is difficult or impossible.

Most recently, Dr. Vanessa Denny, an attending physician in the division of Pediatric Critical Care Medicine at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP), used it in Kumasi, Ghana, to teach pediatric sepsis management — a critical aspect of recognizing and treating life-threatening infections in children.

Annenberg Hotkeys was designed by Annenberg's Kyle Cassidy in collaboration with Dr. Elizabeth Sanseau at CHOP, and later substantially improved by Matt O'Donnell, Research Associate in the Communication Neuroscience Lab. It was adapted by Denny's team and Cassidy for use in Ghana, by using context-specific videos featuring Ghanaian children to create an engaging and realistic simulation. →

(Top) Kyle Cassidy and Vanessa Denny, M.D. discuss the use of Annenberg Hotkeys to train doctors in Ghana to diagnose pediatric shock.



And the results were stunning: “Preliminary data from our research phase indicated a significant decrease in septic shock mortality following training with this tool,” said Denny.

“One of the remarkable things about Vanessa and Kyle’s work is that the implementation of the novel Annenberg Hotkeys educational innovation combined with remote debriefing of real life events resulted in 18 more children’s lives saved (estimated 540 quality of life-years) in the six month study period alone,” said Vinay Nadkarni, MD, Professor of Critical Care and Pediatrics at the University of Pennsylvania’s Perelman School of Medicine.

“The platform’s low bandwidth requirements and user-friendly interface facilitated easy training for local healthcare providers,” Denny said. “We have now expanded the use of this novel, contextualized tool to various hospitals in Ghana and other sub-Saharan countries.”

ANNENBERG
HOTKEYS

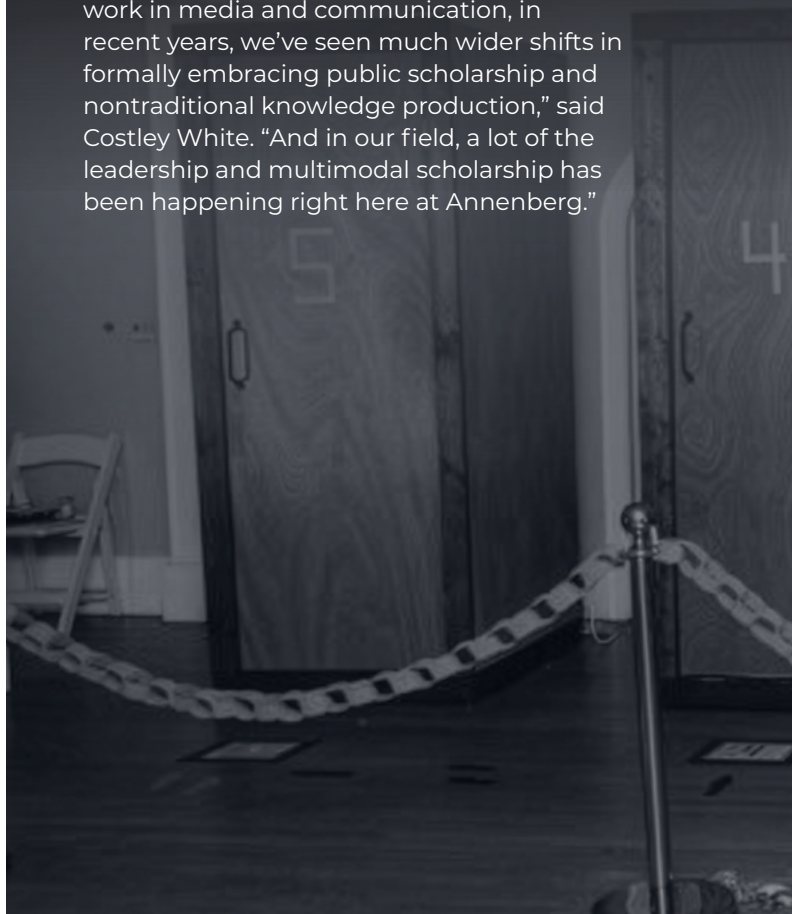
Annenberg Hotkeys is free and can be
accessed at AnnenbergHotkeys.com.

(Top) An attending physician in the division of Pediatric Critical Care Medicine at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP).

Alum Khadijah Costley White’s Multimodal Research on Active Shooter Drills

A leading voice in community-engaged scholarship and multimodal research, Annenberg alum Khadijah Costley White (Ph.D. '13) recently shared her work on student and teacher experiences of active shooter drills in her immersive, scholarship-driven and scholarship-producing art installation, “This is Not a Drill,” and as the speaker at Annenberg’s 2025 Annual George Gerbner Lecture in Communication.

The project, both artistic and academic, explored the negative impact of active shooter drills on students, parents and teachers. “While there has long been multimodal work in media and communication, in recent years, we’ve seen much wider shifts in formally embracing public scholarship and nontraditional knowledge production,” said Costley White. “And in our field, a lot of the leadership and multimodal scholarship has been happening right here at Annenberg.”



During the lecture, which has been held annually since 2006 to honor Ambassador Walter and Mrs. Leonore Annenberg, she discussed how her multimodal work intentionally intersects with her exploration of power in her more traditional scholarship on media and politics, such as her book “The Branding of Right-Wing Activism” and a co-edited collection, “Media and January 6th.” Just outside her lecture, her installation, “This is Not a Drill,” had participants confront a series of wooden boxes, each with only a button inside. When pressed, they were plunged into darkness and immersed in tales of shooting drills told by teachers and students reacting to them within their schools, an experience far different from reading a research paper.

Costley White began this project outside of any research institution. As an activist, she started SOMA Justice, a community nonprofit that often uses narratives and storytelling to help people understand how race, inequity, and power function in our society. Their work has paid off school lunch debts, supplied resources to food-insecure families, offered emergency loans to community members, helped create the first suburban police review board in the state, and provided water safety skills to neurodivergent and non-traditional learners, among other impactful initiatives. Both community advocacy on policy and education on complex social issues are central to the group’s efforts.

“As I’m continuing to expand my work focused on publicly-engaged research in media and communication, the talk provided a wonderful opportunity for me to share and discuss my research and ideas with both my colleagues and the very people who trained me,” said Costley White.

One of the first things that mobilized SOMA Justice to act around safety and policing in schools and brought Costley White’s attention to the subject, and ultimately inspired “This is Not a Drill,” was the school district’s plan to use the popular active shooter drill training program ALICE, which has been rolled out in schools across the country.

Local kids and families shared that the drills already in place were deeply traumatizing and unhelpful. Research showed that such drills offered no clear benefit in improving safety, and ALICE, in particular, with its heavy links to law enforcement, was described by participants as unhelpful, hyper-realistic and dangerous. When her local school district was considering a contract with ALICE, Costley White and others in SOMA Justice successfully worked to prevent it.

This kind of activism is directly linked to her academic work. Her use of alternative research practices and nontraditional forms, including interactive media projects, prioritizes accessibility, democratic deliberation, community participation and public service. She won a Whiting Public Engagement Fellowship that supported the project and allowed it to come to fruition. During the lecture, she spoke passionately about how combining research with practice serves to enrich the other, offering new ways to engage communities and foster democratic dialogue around urgent policy and social issues.



Why Annenberg Matters

WATCH THE VIDEOS



Since its founding in 1958, Annenberg has been at the forefront of socially transforming breakthroughs in areas such as public health, democracy, media literacy and data science. Our new video series explores the impact of Annenberg's groundbreaking work, past and present, revealing how our research and scholarship are shaping the future of health, media and social understanding. As the landscape of higher education shifts, these videos highlight some of what is at stake.



In Service of a Healthier, Happier World

How we talk about health matters. At the Annenberg School, scholars study how messages spread, who they reach and how they change lives. By examining the role of interpersonal and mass-mediated communication on health-related attitudes, opinions and behaviors, our scholars seek to improve the quality of personal and public health.



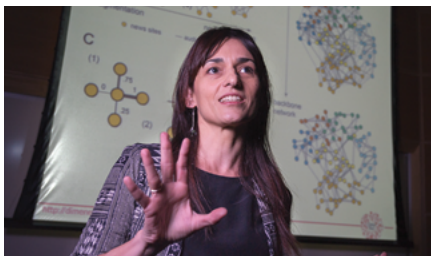
In Service of an Informed Democracy

Determining fact over fiction matters. For decades, scholars at the School have been researching not just misinformation but also what it means to be a citizen, to be able to participate in free elections, and to experience the privileges of our Constitution. The Annenberg Public Policy Center is one of many centers at the School that produces research, conferences and policy discussions to inform policymakers, journalists and the general public about the role media plays in their lives and in the life of the nation.



Connecting Culture and Democracy

In a democracy, media matters. In the mid-20th century, Gilbert Seldes, the founding dean of the Annenberg School, proposed a revolutionary idea: that cultural forms like jazz, comics and television were crucial to shaping our democracy. Today, as digital platforms proliferate and global media landscapes transform, Annenberg scholars continue to explore how emerging cultural expressions profoundly influence our identity, worldview and potential for societal transformation.



Making Sense of the World with Data

How we use data matters. Since Klaus Krippendorff, the Gregory Bateson Professor Emeritus of Communication at Annenberg, transformed the practice of content analysis advancing the fields of political science, social science, marketing, national security and AI — the School has been at the forefront of computational social science. To this day, our scholars use data to inform decision making across industry, policy and health care domains — and ultimately, to make sense of the world.

ANNENBERG CONVERSATIONS

>> *With the Dean*

In 2024, the School launched a podcast to examine vital and pressing issues in the field of communication studies with leading Annenberg scholars. Hosted by Sarah Banet-Weiser, Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication, “Annenberg Conversations” covers emerging and pressing issues in public health, culture, politics, policy and institutions.

In the inaugural episode before national elections last year, Dean Banet-Weiser spoke with Sarah J. Jackson and Yphtach Lelkes, associate professors at Annenberg, about how affective polarization, the uncommitted movement, and race and gender shaped the 2024 presidential elections in the United States.

The second episode, titled “Lessons in Joy and Care,” was released in spring 2025. The Dean was joined by Annenberg professors Desmond Upton Patton and Julia Ticona to discuss centering joy and care within institutions, building communities of compassion and trust, creating a joy plan, and how researchers, social workers and even social media users should think about these terms.

SEASON TWO IS NOW UNDERWAY.

The first episode of the second season takes a look at the cross-border flow of media, in a moment when tariffs and the transnational flow of goods are dominating political debates. To unpack this topic, Dean Banet-Weiser spoke with Annenberg professor Aswin Punathambekar and assistant professor Juan Llamas-Rodriguez.

FIND ANNENBERG CONVERSATIONS
on your favorite podcast app, or
visit our website to listen.



(Top) Dean Sarah Banet-Weiser. (Middle) Speaking with professor Aswin Punathambekar and assistant professor Juan Llamas-Rodriguez. (Bottom) Assistant professor Julia Ticona.

The Neuroscience of Choice, Change and Connection

As director of the Communication Neuroscience Lab and the Annenberg Public Policy Center's Climate Communication Division, Annenberg School for Communication Professor Emily Falk spends a lot of time thinking about the neuroscience of decision making, behavior change and successful communication.

Her new book, "What We Value: The Neuroscience of Choice and Change," weaves together brain science with personal anecdotes and captivating stories from public figures in areas ranging from journalism to entertainment to sports. "I hope that if people understand how their brains work, it could give them more agency in thinking about the choices and the possibilities that they have," Falk says.

Scan to order the book, available online now.



Q

You start the book by writing about the value system and the self-relevance system. What are they, and how do they shape the choices we make?

The value system and self-relevance system are two core networks in the brain that shape how we make choices, whether we realize it or not. The value system helps us assess what's worth our time, attention and effort. It calculates the value of each option we consider, basically asking, 'What's the likely possibility for reward here?' Our self-relevance system helps us identify things that are 'me' or 'not me.'

One of the things I talk about in the book is how much overlap there is between self-relevance and value judgments. Things that are perceived as 'me' are often also thought of as more positive or good; things that are thought of as 'not me' are less positive and less good. That can be helpful for maintaining a positive sense of self, but it can also limit us in the possibilities that we see for ourselves.



Q

What can we learn from neuroscience research about how to change our behaviors and how our social relationships impact behavior change?

Neuroscience has shown that behavior change is not just about willpower; it's about how our brains assign value to different choices and how that value can shift in different contexts and environments. In general, you might prefer coffee over tea, but you might change your mind if it's midnight and you're already feeling over-caffeinated, or if a friend raves to you about a new boba place. Change happens when new behaviors start to feel rewarding.

As we think about changing our own behaviors, one insight is that the value system tends to prioritize rewards that come as soon as possible. Knowing that, we can think about how to make things that are compatible with our bigger-picture goals more immediately rewarding. If I want to get more exercise, how can I make that more fun in the moment, like by listening to an exciting audiobook or watching a television show I wouldn't otherwise watch, or doing it with a friend?

Thinking about the self-relevance system, one of the issues we run into is defensiveness. We can be reluctant to trade in behaviors or ideas that we think of as ours, and so one way to get around that is interventions that help us zoom out and connect with the bigger world. If you take a moment to reflect on your core values — such as family, creativity, loyalty, spirituality or compassion — your brain becomes more receptive to messages about behavior change. Studies using brain imaging show that this type of values affirmation makes neural circuits involved in valuation and self-related processing more responsive to messages, making health or prosocial messages 'land' more effectively.

A third brain system I describe in the book is the social relevance system, which helps us understand what other people think and feel. This opens all kinds of possibilities for influence that we often don't notice. People who inspire us and share our goals influence us, and so do people whose actions and values we wouldn't want to emulate. Neuroscience evidence suggests that when we learn about other people's preferences or see their behaviors, it can change the response of reward circuits in our brains. Knowing this, we can be more mindful of the stories we share with our kids, the people we're spending time with and the media we are consuming.

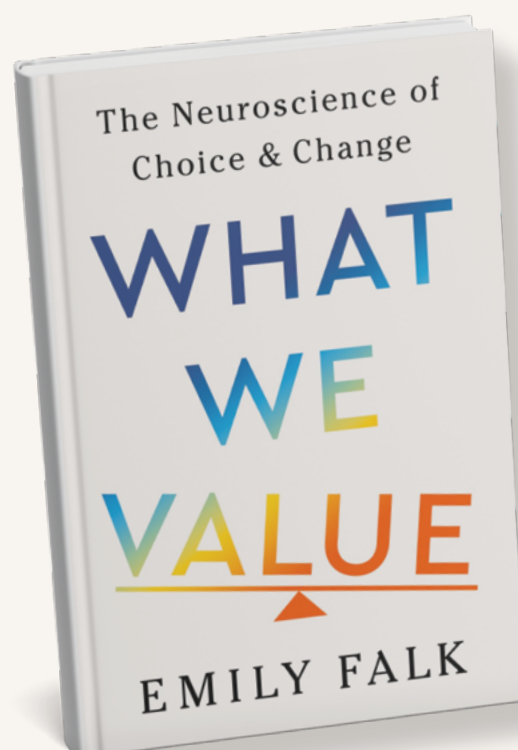
Q

Your book highlights colleagues across Penn, such as Katy Milkman, Joe Kable, and Dani Bassett. How has their work inspired you and shaped your own research and thinking?

When I first came to Penn, I ended up sharing a pod in Richards [Hall] with Joe Kable, one of the world's leading expert on value-based decision-making and the brain's value system. Joe has been an incredible pioneer in mapping that system and understanding how people make decisions with immediate versus more delayed rewards.

Katy, I'm just such a fan of her work. Her book "How to Change" was a stellar example of taking complicated behavioral science and distilling it in a quite usable way. She has so many different lines of work that are amazing. The Behavior Change for Good Initiative is also a pioneering example of how to bring scientists together to test what works and what doesn't for changing people's behavior and lives.

Dani Bassett was one of my closest collaborators for quite some time. Their work pushed the field to think about the brain in network terms. It was a real joy getting to collaborate with them on understanding the interplay between brain network dynamics and social network dynamics.

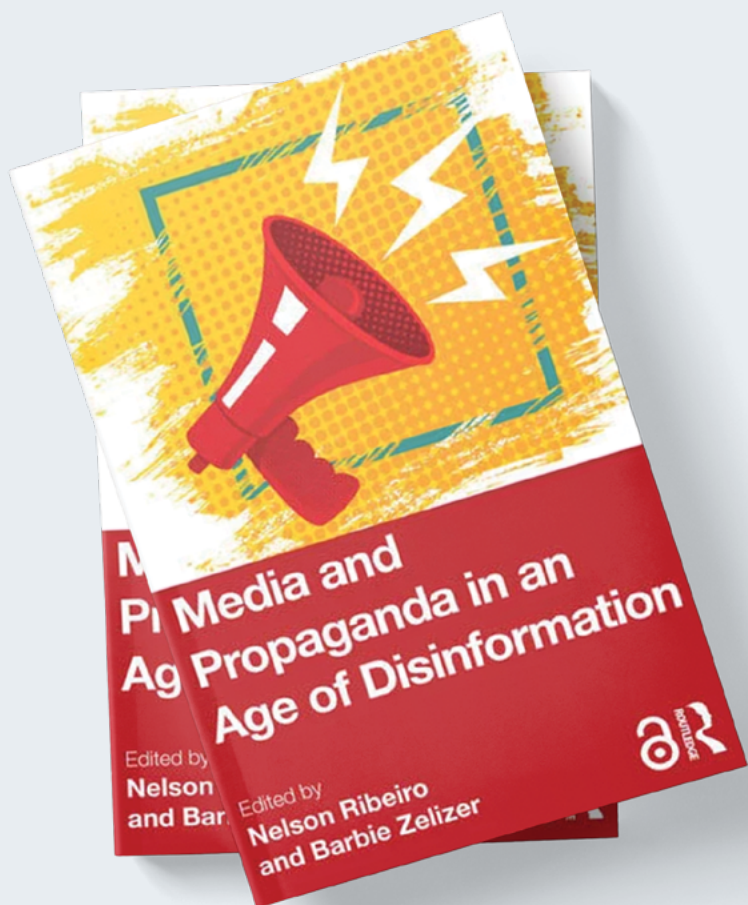


Media and Propaganda in an Age of Disinformation

A newly published book, edited by Barbie Zelizer, Raymond Williams Professor at the Annenberg School for Communication, and Nelson Ribeiro, Professor of Communication Studies at Universidade Católica Portuguesa — “Media and Propaganda in an Age of Disinformation”—explores propaganda across borders, topics and timelines.

The book emerges from the Lisbon Winter School for the Study of Communication, a week-long workshop that allows early-career researchers from around the world to explore pressing topics in media and communication with senior scholars. Zelizer, director of Annenberg’s Center for Media at Risk, has collaborated with Ribeiro, Vice-Rector at the Universidade Católica Portuguesa, for the last five years to hold these workshops.

Each chapter in the book started as a keynote given at the Lisbon Winter School, Zelizer explains. There is a chapter by Ciara Greene called “From Fake News to False Memories: Tracing the Consequences of Exposure to Misinformation,” and David Welch’s keynote turned into the chapter “Know Your Enemy: Propaganda and Stereotypes of the “Other” From World War I to the Present.” In addition to the book, the International Journal of Communication featured a special section of articles in 2024 drawn from select presentations about media and propaganda by the Winter School’s early-career researchers.



We spoke with Zelizer about the volume, which is available online now.



Q

In your chapter, “Is Propaganda by Any Other Name Still Propaganda?” you write that there is a tendency, particularly in democratic regimes, not to call propaganda campaigns “propaganda.” Why do you think that is?

We see unmistakable currents for thinking about propaganda that limit its use in democracies. Though early thinkers about propaganda — like Lasswell, Lippmann or Bernays — argued it had good and bad sides that made it relevant to all kinds of political regimes, the binary thinking of the Cold War shifted use of the term “propaganda” to address autocracies and the term “information” to describe what happens in democracies.

This idea, that autocracies propagandize while democracies persuade, has been strengthened ever since. It’s particularly prevalent today, where a combination of privatization, polarization and digitization hides the similarities between current information disorder and traditional notions of propaganda. Identifying information disorder as propaganda risks impairing the very foundation on which democracy rests. So we tend to steer clear of it.

Q

What can history tell us about propaganda in the contemporary digital media environment?

History shows us that the distinction we draw between “good” and “bad” regimes, especially when we associate them with propaganda’s “absence” and “presence,” simply doesn’t hold. They are more similar than we recognize. Not only is the boundary less clear and stable than we would like to believe, but it is a cautionary sign for how we read today’s information disorder around us. For if we don’t link current information chaos to its historical antecedents more fully, we’ll struggle to slow its spread.

Q

What do you find when comparing propaganda in democratic and autocratic regimes?

The fact that propaganda gets externalized to autocratic regimes and invisibilized in democracies makes it harder to secure a clear picture of what it looks like comparatively. The traditional practices of top-down and state-controlled nefarious relays still exist.

But so do current practices that may seem to be more about persuasion than propaganda. These practices substitute privatization for state activity, lateral and multi-directional polarization for top-down control and digital technology for legacy media. They suggest that we need to do a better job of identifying propaganda that works differently from the traditional model and to be clearer about how notions like disinformation, misinformation and fake news are all very much varying forms of propaganda.

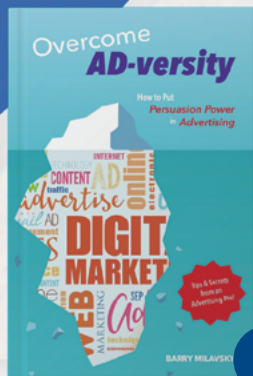
We need a more capacious understanding of current propagandistic practices if we are ever to regain a more healthy information environment.



NEW BOOKS

FROM

ASC ALUMNI



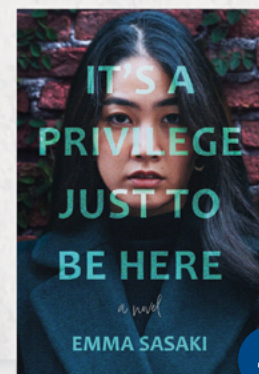
1



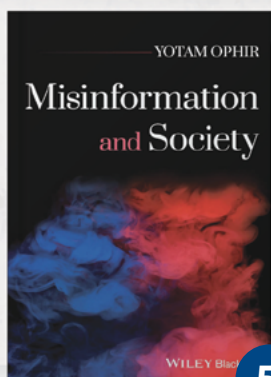
2



3



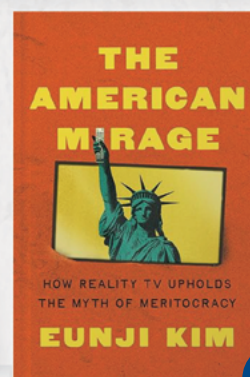
4



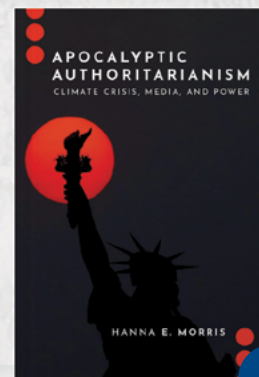
5



6



7



8

Here we present a selection of the books our alumni published over the last year.

1 **“Overcome AD-versity: How to Put Persuasion Power in Advertising”** Barry Milavsky (M.A.C. '72)

Barry Milavsky teaches advertisers to improve their work through a deeper understanding of their target audience. He takes readers through the elements of persuasive advertising, with fascinating real-life examples using well-known brands, to understand practical applications of psychological ideas.

2 **“Expect Great Things! How the Katharine Gibbs School Revolutionized the American Workplace for Women”** Vanda Krefft (M.A.C. '01)

Vanda Krefft details the success of the Katharine Gibbs School, which, from the 1910s to the 1960s, trained women for executive secretary positions while helping them ascend to leadership themselves and achieve lifelong financial independence.

3 **“Experiencing the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Children, Peace Communication and Socialization”** Yael Warshel (M.A.C. '00)

Yael Warshel critically determines the efficacy of peace communication interventions in managing political conflicts, tracing the socialization of Palestinian and Israeli children amid conflict zones at a granular level. Her book received the 2025 ICA Mass Communication Innovation Award in Methods for the scope and depth of her multi-method approach to comparative research, which was defined as “innovative.”

4 **“It’s a Privilege Just to Be Here: A Novel”** Masaki Hidaka (Ph.D. '05)

In her debut novel, Masaki Hidaka, under the pseudonym Emma Sasaki, writes a witty take-down of racial inequality at prep schools. The novel explores the growing tensions between generations with different ideas of how to fight for what one believes in.

5 **“Misinformation & Society”** Yotam Ophir (Ph.D. '18)

University of Buffalo associate professor Yotam Ophir gives in-depth case studies of high-profile events such as Brexit and COVID-19 to demonstrate how misinformation has shaped public discourse.

6 **“Appropriate, Negotiate, Challenge: Activist Imaginaries and the Politics of Digital Technologies”** Elisabetta Ferrari (Ph.D. '19)

Elisabetta Ferrari explores the fraught relationship between social movements and digital media, looking into how three leftist activist groups reckon with online spaces that do not always reflect their politics. Ferrari examines social movements in three countries: the Italian student collective LUME (Laboratorio Universitario Metropolitano), the 2014 Hungarian internet tax protests and the U.S.-based Philly Socialists.

7 **“The American Mirage: How Reality TV Upholds the Myth of Meritocracy”** Eunji Kim (Ph.D. '19)

Eunji Kim shows that amid a dazzling array of media choices, many Americans simply are not consuming the news. Instead, millions flock to entertainment programs that showcase real-life success stories, such as “American Idol,” “Shark Tank,” and “MasterChef.” Kim examines how shows like these leave viewers confoundingly optimistic about the prospects of upward mobility.

8 **“Apocalyptic Authoritarianism: Climate Crisis, Media, and Power”** Hanna E. Morris (Ph.D. '21)

Hanna Morris analyzes the ways that journalists have framed and communicated the climate crisis since the 2016 election of Donald Trump and its impact on public perceptions of the crisis and political action. She says that there were a lot of clear anti-democratic trends emerging at the time of Trump's first election, and at the same time, really pronounced visible threats of climate change. These threats were combined and interpreted by journalists as a ‘total crisis.’ “What I found was that by framing these threats together as a total crisis, journalists avoided analyzing how we got here to begin with,” Morris said.

Send your updates and information about your new book to news@asc.upenn.edu.

ALUMNI NEWS

Q&A

Meet the new members of the Dean's Advisory Board



CHRISTINA LEE serves as Vice President of Reputation & Content Strategy at Amazon, leading a team that includes research, paid marketing, owned content, channels, and internal communications.

Christina Lee (C'00, W'00)

Before joining Amazon, Christina was the marketing and communications partner at venture firm Kleiner Perkins, where she managed all aspects of the brand and provided strategic marketing and communications counsel to early- and late-stage growth companies across digital, life sciences and sustainability sectors. In 2000, Christina graduated with a B.S. in economics and a B.A. in international studies from the Huntsman Program in International Studies at the Wharton School of Business at Penn.

Q: What is your favorite memory from Penn?

My most cherished Penn memory is studying abroad at Tsinghua University in Beijing. I was fortunate enough to matriculate as a local student, fully immersed alongside China's brightest minds. The language was tough, but being so integrated into the university was incredibly unique. The local students were welcoming and remarkably hardworking. Seeing their dedication firsthand gave me a deep appreciation for the Chinese people, their work ethic, and the immense talent coming out of their universities. That semester in Beijing ultimately inspired my later decision to live and work there early in my career.

Q: What was your favorite place to hang out while at Penn?

At the risk of sounding cliché, I always loved hanging out on Locust Walk. Locust Walk is the heartbeat of Penn's campus — it's where the university's energy really comes alive. The constant buzz of students, the spontaneous run-ins, the energy of campus life unfolding right in front of you. Some of my best memories — laughing with friends, rushing to class, soaking in the traditions like Hey Day and Convocation — all happened right there. It's always felt like the heart of Penn.

Q: What is one lesson from your time at Penn that you would share with Annenberg students?

The best questions are often better than the right answers. They invite

dialogue, spark curiosity and lead to new discoveries. In a world that is moving fast — where industries evolve, information shifts and certainty is rare — asking the right questions is often more powerful than having the right answers.

So don't wait until you're 100% sure before you speak up. Keep questioning. Keep exploring. Don't take for granted that Penn is a place that not only encourages curiosity but also nurtures it as a mindset. And it's one of the most valuable things you'll carry with you beyond graduation.

Q: What has inspired you to connect with Annenberg?

The entire communications landscape is shifting in real time. Traditional media has been upended by new platforms like TikTok, podcasts and newsletters, empowering individuals and brands to become their own media channels. Meanwhile, the attention economy has raised the bar — content has to be short, emotionally compelling and visually striking just to stand out. And underlying all of this is AI, rapidly changing how we create, personalize and optimize content.

All of this creates an urgent need for strategic thinkers who understand not just tools, but people. With audiences demanding more authenticity, now is the perfect time to connect with the Annenberg School because it's one of the few places blending deep academic insight with real-world innovation. Whether you're looking to lead in media, tech, policy or storytelling, Annenberg is at the center of where communication is headed next.

Annenberg is excited to welcome two distinguished professionals to our Advisory Board – Christina Lee and Michael Persaud. Their diverse backgrounds, strategic insight and shared commitment will play a critical role in steering Annenberg's long-term vision.



MICHAEL A. PERSAUD
is a Portfolio Manager
and Financial Advisor
with Morgan Stanley in
Beverly Hills, CA.

Michael A. Persaud (W '90)

Before joining Morgan Stanley, Michael served as President at MUSE Communications, a Hollywood-based advertising agency. Additionally, Michael co-founded the brand marketing agency, Persaud Brothers, where he also served as president and advised C-suite executives of several Fortune 500 companies and brands. Michael earned an MBA from Harvard Business School and a B.S. in Finance from the Wharton School of Business at Penn. He resides in California with his two daughters.

Q: What is your favorite memory from Penn?

While Penn is known for its academic excellence, my favorite memories are more on the social front. Some of the greatest hits:

1. **HEY DAY:** the energy, the chaos, the class unity — unforgettable.
2. **WALNUT WALK DURING SENIOR WEEK:** do they still do that? It was a legendary send-off.
3. **PENN RELAYS:** the excitement and pride around campus during that weekend was next-level.
4. **MY FRATERNITY'S PARTIES AT BODEK LOUNGE AND OUR HOUSE:** some truly epic nights.
5. **CASTLE PARTIES:** IYKYK.

Q: What was your favorite place to hang out while at Penn?

The lounge at DuBois College House. It was a place to unwind, catch up and feel grounded. A real sense of community lived there.

Q: What is one lesson from your time at Penn that you would share with Annenberg students?

Make Penn work for you. There's no single path here — so explore, ask questions, build relationships across schools and communities. The more you stretch, the more you'll grow — not just academically, but personally and professionally.

Q: What has inspired you to connect with Annenberg?

Although I currently work in finance, the bulk of my career has been rooted in media and communications. I've built a strong network and gained insights that I believe can help propel the next generation of leaders. I want to share that and contribute to Annenberg's growth and future impact.

Q: Is there anything else you would share with the Annenberg community?

As a Wharton grad, I'd say this: never underestimate the power of communication. Strategy and numbers matter, but being able to connect, persuade and lead with clarity is what sets top performers apart. Annenberg gives you that edge. Lean into it, and you'll be ahead of the curve no matter what field you pursue.

For more information about how you can contribute to Annenberg's advancement efforts, please contact director of development Eliza Walmsley, esw1@upenn.edu.

For more than three decades, Emerson Coleman, M.A.C. '78, has been among the entertainment industry's most highly regarded programming executives. In his capacity as senior vice president at Hearst Television, he helped launch and support multiple long-running shows hosted by Tamron Hall, Jennifer Hudson, Kelly Clarkson, Ellen DeGeneres, Steve Harvey, Meredith Vieira, Oprah Winfrey and others.

We reached out to Coleman to share his life story with us.

EMERSON COLEMAN, M.A.C. '78

In my own WORDS:



When you look closely at people's lives, it often reveals a more extraordinary story than you could possibly imagine. My own journey from the "sticks" of Leaksville, North Carolina, a town too small to make its way onto most maps, to a 44-story tower in midtown Manhattan was far from expected.

I've long appreciated being a little bit country and a little bit city, especially as I've had the opportunity over the years, and mostly for work as a field producer, to travel across every continent (except Antarctica — that's not going to happen).

My family moved from North Carolina to Maryland when my dad, a printer, led the fight to integrate one of the major daily newspapers at the time and successfully broke the color line at the venerable Baltimore Sun.

My mother, a very accomplished teacher, always emphasized the value of education, so when I graduated from Brown University, there was a sense of accomplishment for our immediate family as well as our extended family.

There were no communications courses when I was at Brown. I recall a class in semiotics. That's as close as I could get. Communication was barely a discipline, and I ended up majoring in English and American literature. Along the way, however, I took a course in French which focused on the New Wave. I was immersed in works by Godard, Rohmer, Chabrol, Rivette, and Truffaut, and that inspired and advanced my interest in photography and storytelling. I learned that the Annenberg School could be a place where I could develop my interests further, so I applied and was accepted to the MAC program. During my studies, I was fortunate to have Professors Sol Worth and Larry Gross as my advisors.

In Washington, D.C. after Annenberg, while still focused on film, I began freelancing at a local TV station in Baltimore. It turned out to be a better experience than I expected, and my landlord was especially happy that I could pay the rent. Over time, I climbed the ladder from production assistant to executive producer. It was the heyday of local TV, and the station was buzzing with talented producers and hosts from Maria Shriver to Oprah Winfrey.

I worked in Boston at WBZ and at two local stations in Baltimore, WJZ and WBAL. It was great on-the-job training. My last station title was director of broadcast operations, and to this day, no one knows what that really means, so some of everything falls on your desk. I was once assigned to represent the station for coverage of the Preakness Parade, only to walk into a room filled with every city agency, expecting that I would produce it. I quickly learned that making it up as you go was a requirement of the position. Around the same time, I launched a local show called "The Bottom Line," on which former Annenberg School dean George Gerbner appeared twice as a guest.

I served on the executive leadership team at Hearst in New York for 23 years, retiring as Senior Vice President of programming in 2022. The following year, I was honored when the National Association of Broadcasters launched the Emerson Coleman Fellowship to nurture young people entering television careers.

One program that holds a special place is "Matter of Fact with Soledad O'Brien," which I launched in 2015. We spun off a related series of four web specials titled "The Matter of



Fact Listening Tour,” which included the episodes “The Hard Truth About Bias,” “To Be An American,” and “Promises of Change and Trailblazers, Troublemakers and Dreams.” In episodes of the half-hour weekly version of the show, we interviewed Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Michael X. Delli Carpini, each a former dean of the Annenberg School.

I’ve always felt that the School could make an even greater contribution to the content and business side of media than it already has.

I am encouraged about the ways a carefully constructed master’s program could provide an invaluable path for future content creators and, importantly, decision makers — especially at a time when so many fundamental issues, in terms of engagement, distribution and ownership and monetization are being revisited.

I’m very enthusiastic about being a part of the [Dean’s Advisory] Board. It’s a way to thank the School for what they have given me and to help pass that opportunity on to others.

As the traditional media environment is being upended, I am especially interested in identifying ways that the next generation can play a leadership role in addressing the foundational changes that will impact all of us. I also have very selfish reasons for visiting Philadelphia any chance I get.

While at Annenberg, I spent a lot of time studying and researching the city’s signature graffiti, and I still think it is fascinating. So, when I’m in town, I love to follow all of the colorful messaging and dialogue. Those walls still talk!

SANDRA RISTOVSKA, PH.D. '16, was awarded a prestigious residential fellowship at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (CASBS) at Stanford University.



She is an associate professor at the University of Colorado Boulder.

Founded in 1954, CASBS has been associated with 30 Nobel Prizes, 52 MacArthur Awards, 25 Pulitzer Prizes, and 176 members of the National Academy of Sciences. Several Annenberg faculty members have received this fellowship in the past, including Barbie Zelizer, Damon Centola, Diana Mutz, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, and Sandra González-Bailón.

Ristovska will join a class of 33 fellows from 18 U.S. and 12 international institutions, working in fields as wide-ranging as agriculture, anthropology, business, communication, economics, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, public health and sociology.



Annenberg Alumni meet at Local Journalism Researchers Workshop

The 2025 Local Journalism Researchers Workshop, co-hosted by UNC Chapel Hill and Duke University in March, was attended by several Annenberg alumni.

From left to right in the photo: Antoine Haywood, Ph.D. '24, Jennifer Henrichsen Ph.D. '21, Muira McCammon Ph.D. '21, and Louisa Lincoln Ph.D. '25.

Annenberg Alumni at ICA

This June, Annenberg was well-represented at the 75th Annual ICA Conference in Denver. Over 20 scholars shared research on topics ranging from YouTube’s evolving copyright policies to the future of climate change communication. The lively Annenberg East/West Reception united colleagues from Penn and USC, while our beloved alumni breakfast offered a warm space for faculty, students and friends to reconnect.



Students and alumni connect over breakfast at ICA

Recent doctoral graduate **ANTOINE HAYWOOD (PH.D. '24)** received an Outstanding Dissertation Award from ICA’s Activism, Communication and Social Justice Division. **ALUM Yael Warschel (M.A.C. '00)** received the 2025 ICA Mass Communication Innovation Award in Methods for her book “Experiencing the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Children, Peace Communication and Socialization.”



3620 Walnut St,
Philadelphia, PA 19104

SHARE YOUR NEWS WITH US!

The Annenberg School for Communication is a vibrant, diverse, and cohesive community of scholars at the forefront of engaging with today's media landscape and addressing the major issues of our world.

SHARE NOW



CONNECT WITH ANNENBERG

