Perspectives in Anthropology: Building Better SciComm - with Tina Lasisi, Ph.D.

Tina Lasisi Ph.D. came to anthropology as an undergraduate at the University of Cambridge. During a lecture on human phenotypic variation, her professor outlined our anthropological understanding of skin color, but Tina was more interested in hair. What began as a quick Wikipedia search then evolved into an undergraduate thesis and eventually a dissertation. Her dissertation research advances an entirely novel method of quantifying hair-fiber morphology, while also illuminating the genetic and evolutionary underpinnings of human scalp hair morphology. In May 2021, she became the first Black person to graduate with a Ph.D. in anthropology from Pennsylvania State University. Whether it's a viral Twitter thread or a feature on [NPR's Short Wave](), Tina's aptitude for sharing her research in an accessible way has become a part of her brand.

Today, Tina serves as a postdoctoral researcher at Pennsylvania State University where she focuses on creating science education content about human genetic and phenotypic variation. Her work continues to challenge the way that typological understandings of race and phenotypic variation limit the potential of our science. Speaking briefly over Zoom, Tina shared her thoughts on playing to your strengths, effectively using social media, and how academics can continue to be better science communicators.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Isis: Great science communication and public education is always intentional. At what point in your academic career did you decide to really begin incorporating science communication into the work you do?

Tina: There wasn't really a shift for me. I've always had to explain my research to people, because there was nobody doing exactly what I'm doing, and I've always worked with people who are doing something very different from me. Science communication has always been part of what I do, and I think that is bound to happen when you are doing something where there isn't already an established group of people studying it. Especially when you're doing interdisciplinary work. Everyone has very specialized knowledge, and a lot of times we talk about science communication as "Oh I have to explain my research to the public." In my case, the "public" can also be other academics, with a Ph.D. in population genetics, engineering, or even anthropology. Constantly having to explain my research to collaborators has definitely made it easier for me to turn around and explain it in a public way. I think that as people gradually specialize more and more, they surround themselves with people who also have this shared knowledge. So, the first time that they're communicating with someone and they have to explain the basics of their work, it becomes this incredulous moment of "What? You guys don't know this? I thought this was common knowledge!" and it's not.

And then there's the fact that I had to recruit people to participate in my studies. So, I have to be able to explain to people why I am studying this, what's interesting about it, and why they should want to participate in it.

Isis: Exactly, so you've always had to have your elevator pitch ready! Tell us more about distilling something as complicated as your project into something like a fifteen minute Short Wave.

Tina: It's a process! I realized that I can't just take a lecture or talk that I've given and just "simplify" it, because the particular medium dictates what you can do and should do. For example, in short form videos you have to have one central message and narrow it down to what is essential. It's really hard to simplify something while also making it comprehensive, because there's a balance between making sure you aren't overwhelming people but are still giving them enough information. Working with NPR was so great because I was working with people who are experts at science communication. They're able to ask me all the right questions, and then edit it down to something where people can take one clear message away from it which is incredible. But this also underscores this huge issue in academia, where we're expected to be good at everything. You have to be doing innovative research, writing and winning grants, managing people in your lab, being a great teacher, and then on top of all that you're supposed to be this amazing public science communicator when all of these things are very specific skills. I think this is somewhere we can really take a note from industry, where you usually have teams of people with different skillsets coming together to work on projects.

Isis: Speaking of skills, successfully cultivating social media platforms that reflect you authentically as a person and a researcher is definitely a special skill. In your opinion, what does it take to successfully do science communication on social media?

Tina: I think that social media is a particular way of building community with other people and a particular way of communicating. Social media ends up working for people who may not be the most comfortable with in-person socializing, which is why I think I like it. Because everything is not happening all at once. You can see what other people are saying, then configure what you want it to say and just put that out there.

I don't have to think about when I am going to post about me personally versus when I am going to post about my science, because I don't see my work as separate from who I am as a person. I do often think "Is this thought worth turning into an intentional thread or communication effort?" And over time I think you get better at letting things go and figuring out what things are worth talking about. You can respond to other people's content and make it into like a bigger learning or communication opportunity, or you can also just focus on work that you've produced and putting that out there. But it's all about recognizing opportunities, and deciding whether they're worth investing your time in as well as determining how much time you're willing to invest, and what your ultimate goals are. Another thing to consider is your platform or medium. A lot of the time, people have great

things to say, but whatever social media platform they're using is not the best format for it. What you can do on Instagram versus Twitter versus YouTube or even TikTok is very different. So, part of it is finding the best fit for you and your goals. Lastly, there's the combination of putting out content that is perceived as authentic and that people find interesting! Something about how Twitter interacts with my procrastination has made it easy for me to be active in a way that doesn't feel like a lot of extra effort. People can tell when things feel forced, or when you're just trying to go viral or check a box. So, I think people should only tap into social media if it's something they can actually enjoy.

Isis: I agree! Social media is supposed to be fun, but obviously as your platform grows so do expectations as far as your engagement. How do you decide what kinds of engagement are most effective or most important to you?

Tina: I think if you are active in any kind of public sense, people know you and they know you for particular things. You don't necessarily need to have that many followers for someone to slide into your DMs with a question. I've had people reaching out about hair related things since I was an undergraduate, including a hairdresser who was involved in publishing an art book being made about red hair. And I was able to contribute to that book! So, when people associate you with a broad subjects like hair, or skin color variation, and they have any kind of ability to connect to you to ask, they do!

There's also this recurring discussion on social media where we tell people to just Google things they don't know, and then we're like "Oh my God, where are people getting all this misinformation?" But that's just how Google's algorithm works half the time. A lot of knowledge that we have is very complex and it was really hard for us to get to this point. And it can be difficult for people to understand and wrestle with all of the implications of the type of research we do in anthropology. But at the end of the day, you can't explain everything to every person. As you get further along in your career, or as people get to know you and your work more, the number of requests is going to quickly outgrow the amount of time you have to dedicate to public education. If you're a professional SciComm person who actually has a team, you'd be able to sift through all the questions and find some way to batch your responses to them. But there are also a lot of other opportunities where you can share research with people – like public talks or live Q&As. The whole point of science communication should be that we have this knowledge and we are able to translate and share what is relevant. To this day, there is nothing that surpasses organic human intelligence, and our ability to relay that to another person.

Isis: Well when you say it like that, I'm definitely going to think twice before I just tell someone to Google it. To wrap things up, what advice do you have for anyone looking to get started with in science communication?
Tina: The most helpful thing for me was to practice! So many opportunities have come out of me just talking about my research in public, because you never know who is listening. Even if it isn't strategic or intentional, just starting to talk about your research to other people is so helpful. Because you end up building this encyclopedia of reference knowledge about what people do and don't know. What aspects of your work are people

usually interested in? Which concepts do you need to spend a little more time explaining? And knowing what those things are ultimately allows you to communicate more effectively across all of your endeavors. Whether that's with other colleagues from adjacent disciplines, the public, or even writing grants.

When you're doing science communication, you're gathering data just like your regular research. Except it's not only on the content of what you're communicating but how you're communicating. I think the most important thing that anyone can ever learn in life, especially as academics, is how to solicit and use feedback. Because you will get a lot of it, whether you ask for it or not. It can be uncomfortable especially at the beginning, to deal with how people perceive you. Do you seem excited about your work? Do you come across as condescending? It's kind of like learning how to be human all over again, but in a very particular way. It's another skill you have to practice and continuously get better at. And I always tell people, don't just talk to people who you think can do something for you. Talk to everyone, because you never know what you might learn.

To keep up with Dr. Tina Lasisi and her phenomenal scholarship, visit her website at tinalasisi.com and follow her on Instagram, Twitter and TikTok!