

Reflections on the Aspen Ideas Festival ^[1]

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A few weeks ago I attended the Aspen Ideas Festival, where I was one of 300 scholars ^[3] from around the world. I was also one of eight Cenadores ^[4]—a group working to empower Puerto Rican civil society.

I arrived in Aspen prepared—and actually looking forward—to being challenged by new ideas, different points of view and stepping out of my comfort zone.

My elevator pitch was set. I was ready to tell anybody I met how I combine my scientific training with technology to engage scientific communities to crowd-source initiatives and resources to transform science education.

“Hello, my name is Mónica, I am a scientist and science communicator...”

“What kind of scientist?” was the inevitable follow-up. Most people seemed more interested in learning more about the kind of science I had trained on, than in what I am doing now (at least at first).

I believe that everyone can find science inherently fascinating. I know that an individual’s experiences, values and beliefs shape whether they like science (or not) and how they perceive and value science. But I believe that—fundamentally—science is about wonder and curiosity, two basic human emotions.

Wanting to share that sense of wonder and to empower people through that curiosity was precisely why I left research. I am always thinking about how to make science more accessible, how to communicate it more effectively. Much of my work focuses on bridging gaps between science and communities historically underserved by and excluded from science.

Constantly, I underscore the importance of knowing your audience, of thinking deeply and intentionally about whom you are talking with. Yet in Aspen, I failed to listen to my own advice. I didn’t anticipate people would be so interested in learning what kind of science I had done. I didn’t *want* that.

There weren’t that many scientists at the Aspen Ideas Festival (not that I met at least). There was a plurality of people from government, journalism, business, philanthropy, and academia, among others.

Many of the conversations I had felt like an out-of-body experience. They made me wonder about how my perception of what it means to be a scientist was clashing with theirs. They reminded me of how different academia is from the “real world”. They stressed the importance of finding meaningful ways to connect science with technology, economics, business, politics, policy and all other aspects of society. Sometimes it can be easy to forget that science does not happen in a vacuum.

I have been reflecting a lot on what I learned in Aspen. I am still working my way through these lessons, subsequent ideas and questions, and how they can be applied and answered, but here are the ones that stand out the most:

1. Scientists need to step outside the ivory tower

Our every day life depends on science. Scientists from around the world work tirelessly to understand and find answers to some very hard problems. However, to truly find the best solutions to our most pressing societal issues, science needs to integrate with other disciplines.

We need more opportunities and spaces for scientists to interact, discuss and collaborate with people from different industries and backgrounds, outside the ivory tower.

2. *Once a scientist, always a scientist (no matter the context)*

Why was I repeatedly asked about specific science topics? Because *I am a scientist* and that *means something*. Even in a career away from research or academia, scientists continue to have a deep understanding of the scientific process. We can decode complex science concepts. We are well versed on the scientific method. We are adept at problem solving and critical thinking. Scientists need to find ways to make these skills and expertise valuable in different contexts, especially outside of science and academia.

3. *Scientists need to be trained*

Scientific training doesn't prepare scientists to communicate with non-scientists, making stepping outside the ivory tower uncomfortable. For science to benefit society the most, we need to find ways for scientists to effectively connect with people from diverse disciplines and industries.

Communication is a key part of science, but often an afterthought. That needs to change. Communication training needs to become an integral part of scientific training, to give communication its due place within the process of science. Such skills can empower scientists to take ownership of the value they provide to society, so that they can put it forth when they have a seat at a variety of tables.

P. S. The strong feeling of otherness

Going into Aspen, I expected there would be few people of color. I didn't expect that the feeling of otherness would be so strong.

I was glad to see and attend sessions [5] about Black Lives Matter, racism, and white privilege, among others. However, I couldn't help but wonder what it meant to be having these conversations in such a white, privileged and elite space.

The Aspen Ideas Festival is a gathering of big minds, big names and big ideas. How could I, a Puerto Rican, Latinx woman, a woman of color, leverage my presence there?

Carry my community with me. I kept my ears and eyes open for opportunities and connections not just for myself, but also for people in my community. *Speak up.* I brought up the importance of considering the impact of policies and technologies on underserved communities, before they become a reality and not after the fact. I was involved in discussing issues of diversity, inclusion and intersectionality. *Pay it forward.* As I was there, I was already thinking about whom I could nominate as a Scholar for next year.

To turn the ideas and deep discussions had at the Aspen Ideas Festival into actions that address global and social challenges, we need the strength of diverse ideas, experiences and backgrounds. I am committed to holding the door open so that others like me can have a seat at this table.

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