

Science AMA Series: I'm Ira Flatow, the host of public radio's Science Friday. I anchor the show, bringing listeners world wide a lively, informative discussion on science, technology, health, space and the environment. AMA!

ScienceFriday<sup>1</sup>andr/ScienceAMAs<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Affiliation not available

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Hi Ira! Huge fan of what you guys are doing on Science Friday, thanks for coming today.

How do you, as a host and producer strike a balance between catching your audiences attention with flashy intros (is there a radio equivalent of clickbait?) and accurately representing the science? Especially given the recent political outcomes, many have turned a harsh eye toward media which have seemed to forgo honest reporting in lieu of feeding narratives that garner clicks (or eyes, or ears). Even here on [/r/science](#) there are rules to try to limit the scourge of the click bait headline (e.g. "cancer cured!"... [in a petri dish](#)). Science Friday has, in my opinion, deftly walked this line between making science exciting and accessible to a mass audience while staying accurate and reputable, and I imagine a ton of thought goes into that. How do you do it? What lessons would you give to other media sources, or consumers of media?

[p1percub](#)

One of our advantages in deciding what kind of balance we use is our 25 years of experience. It's a problem we face each week, about not over-hyping any one story. The good news about what we do is that we don't need to create clickbait because the stories usually clickbait themselves.

By being a non-profit organization and not a commercial venture, we don't have to worry about the traffic we get to our sites, the number of people who listen, etc (although it is a large number) - we are free to concentrate on the quality of the news and not its entertainment value. Unfortunately, the mainstream broadcast and cable news sources are owned by the entertainment industry, who are more interested in creating a polarized food fight than delivering information of any educational value.

Does it bother you that there are only like 3 people named Ira, and 2 of them work for NPR?

Do you ever get frustrated when someone calls in and clearly got their science from Fox news and has no idea what they are talking about but you have to be polite and just say something like "<Guest>,"

what about that? Should we be concerned?"

On a more serious note, I have a 10 week old son and I'm terrified of his future. 4 years of actively ignoring climate change could mean never recovering. I'm not even sure there is a question here, I'm just terrified.

[monkeydave](#)

Well, neither of us work for NPR...although we are both in public radio. I'm PRI, and the other Ira is PRX. But have you ever seen the both of us in the same room?

While we don't get many Fox viewers, I have learned how to become patient over the years listening to the various opinions of our callers. Their views, although you may not agree with them, are valuable, and need to be heard.

As for your 10-year-old son and being terrified for his future re: climate change, I'm still waiting to see where the rhetoric ends and concrete problems begin. I'm most concerned about environmental issues too, and waiting to see who will be appointed head of the EPA, and how the rest of the world will react if we pull out of the Paris Agreement. You can be sure that we are paying *very* close attention.

Hi Ira,

Who has been your favorite or most memorable guest over the years?

Thanks. Love the show.

[eaglemoses](#)

So many! [Jane Goodall](#), [Elon Musk](#), [Carl Sagan](#), [Lisa Randall](#), They Might Be Giants, [Oliver Sacks](#)... one time Oliver Sacks was on the show to be interviewed. He heard that we were going to be talking about the giant squid, and asked if he could stay on. He's a big cephalopod fan. What a shock that was!

Hi Ira,

Who has been your favorite or most memorable guest over the years?

Thanks. Love the show.

[eaglemoses](#)

I'd have to say Oliver Sacks. And I'd have to say too, Eric Kandel (both of whom happen to be neuroscientists!)

Although I also love having our musical and SciArts guests too - like [Reggie Watts](#). He brought his stuff in the studio and created songs as we sat there.

It was also a hoot to hear golfer Phil Mickelson shout out, "I love Science Friday"!

We also had Hank Azaria, he was terrific. Had a lot of fun too.

Edit: Whoops...did this one twice. But there are a lot of them!

Hello, Ira, Thanks for all your hard work as a science advocate! What do you think can be done to

impress upon the general public that scientific expertise is real in big theoretical areas such as evolution, and climate change? Too often appeals to such expertise get dismissed as nothing more than the biased opinions of egghead academics.

[brindlethorpe](#)

The good news is that the great majority of the public does believe in climate change - not so much on evolution, although there is still a majority of believers. We did a video about Dr. Amanda Glaze, who's studying [the taboo of evolution in the American South](#). It is very hard to change anyone's opinions which may be based on cultural or religious viewpoints. Though I do believe that over time people will not be able to deny the growing evidence or what their eyes tell them is the truth.

What new science research/endeavor are you most excited about?

Also, what are your thoughts on CRISPR?

[Audeconn](#)

Hard to narrow down just one, so I'll name a few. Really excited about the microbiome and how it might be influencing our health, wellbeing, and even those of the people around us. There's a microbiome in the soil, there's a microbiome in trees, just as there are microbiomes in people.

I'm also fascinated that we don't know what all that dark stuff is that makes up 96% of the universe is.

The hopeful signs of immuneobiology, where we tweak the body's immune system to fight disease are really encouraging too.

CRISPR: Just saw a story out today about CRISPR having its first trials in experiments in humans in China trying to cure a patient's lung disease. It's both breathtaking in the possibilities of success and terrifying at the same time for the possibilities of abuse.

I'm a high school physics teacher.. what career advice would you give to students interested with a career in science? Are some of the fields oversaturated?

[soljax](#)

I'd say that any move in the field of medicine, biotechnology, robotics, computer science and cybersecurity would make a good career.

I would also encourage your students to look into the field of science education and become science education advocates. There'll never be too many science teachers!

Hello, Ira! I'm a longtime listener and fan, and a shout out to my local station, KAWC!

Science Friday does a great job covering science and recent technological advances. However, several of my hobbies involve old technology - I especially love vacuum tubes, old cars and electrical appliances.

Would you consider a Science Friday segment covering old technology and how it is still relevant today? Bring on a guest and head back 50 to 100 years and discuss how some older tech is still relevant and how it brought us to where we are today.

[Uncle Erik](#)

You share some of my ancient loves. I gave a lecture to my seventh grade class on vacuum tubes. I repaired old cars and televisions sets back in my youth. As a lover of the history of science, it could be fun to schmooze about how old tech is still relevant today.

By the way, have you seen the record sales of vinyl records? Even film and polaroids are coming back!

Please identify some pros and cons for science as it relates to the Donald Trump presidency.

Also, would you accept a position on The President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology (PCAST)?

[retrospy](#)

The biggest threats for science from a Trump presidency are:

- environmental policy
- funding of research
- the elimination of the EPA or Department of Education
- and the belief that everybody has their own set of facts!

The pros? Trump is a smart person - he grew up in New York which values science, technology, and education, so he's been surrounded by it his whole life. He must understand the value that science and technology bring to the country. So, I have my fingers crossed...

I'm waiting to see who will be appointed as science advisor, and whether the Office of Science and Technology Policy is enhanced or eliminated.

Re: PCAST, I would consider it, but I don't expect to be asked.

Sometimes people call in to discuss their pseudoscientific beliefs. How do you decide how to balance having an open forum with other concerns (keeping the focus on science, being polite to the professional guests, not confusing the public)?

[nezumipi](#)

I'm a great believer in listening to other opinions. By definition, science is a disruptive process. But sometimes there can be limits to the envelope. For example, a few years ago when the creationists were trying to reinvigorate the anti-evolution movement, I resisted creating a false equivalence of a debate between creationism and evolution. To have debated this idea one on one on Science Friday would have given the idea to the audience that there was equal value to both ideas, so we never did it.

How often do you have to correct people when they call you Ira Plato? Also, what area of science do you find the least interesting?

[Queencybeer](#)

Hahahah! I actually had that nickname in high school, which was given to me by another Ira (the only other Ira in school - not THAT other Ira) and it's followed me around ever since. It even morphed once into Socrates! The jocks in high school, they said that Plato wasn't good enough so they morphed it into Socrates because that's what they do. It was fun!

The least interesting? Economics. Because while I've studied probability and statistics and really enjoyed it, I just can't get my head around "the dismal science." And you hear economists being wrong so many times...

I've watched or listened to you for all these years and want to thank you for all that you have done for science. That being said, what has been your favorite book, documentary, movie on science that got you so interested in the beginning?

[ideaman21](#)

One of the earliest books I read was called "Mr. Tompkins in Wonderland" by physicist George Gamow. It shaped my lifelong passion about Einstein and relativity, and I still have the copy yellowing on my bookshelf. It's a great read.

I can tell that you're sick of hearing about how each new discovery will bring about great change in "20 years". I've even heard you joke about it in exasperation.

Having now been on the air for long enough to test these claims, what guest or discovery have you had on the show that actually lived up to the promise of the initial idea/discovery?

[russianpotato](#)

That's a good question. You're right, nuclear fusion is always 30 years away...

I think robotics have lived up to the hype. They may not be advancing as much as we've seen in science fiction, but we've seen terrific strides in the interface and human interaction e.g. prosthetics.

And speaking of science fiction living up to the hype, just look at the film *Minority Report*, and tell me we're not 2/3rds of the way there.

Thoughts on Neil Tyson and his effect on science among young people?

[nothing\\_in\\_common](#)

Neil Tyson is doing a great job popularizing science. And the more he can keep young people interested in science - they all start out as young scientists - the better it is for all of us.

Do you watch science videos on YouTube? What are some of your favorite channels?

[gravylookout](#)

I do watch science on Youtube! One of my favorite channels is [SciShow](#).

I also like the [American Chemical Society channel](#) too.

Of course, [Science Friday](#) has its own channel, which has some of the best science video there is.

Hey Ira!

First of all, I'd like to thank you for continuously working so hard on one of my favorite shows on NPR!

My question -- what is the most memorable story, whether it was for ScienceFriday or not, that you have worked on? Perhaps one that took particularly long to research, fact check, and edit? One that caused a big fuss among listeners? How did it influence your career and/or you as a person?

And thank you again for reinforcing that science can be fun, accessible, and discussed by the public, not just by individuals with lab coats on. Best of luck on all future endeavors!

[annaxdee](#)

It has to be my *All Things Considered* story about wintergreen Lifesavers sparking in the dark back in the 1970s. I went into a closet at the end of ATC with Susan Stanberg to illustrate how wintergreen Lifesavers spark in the dark when you crunch them. I had no idea why that was, but it would soon become one of the popular stories *ever* with all kinds of response from teachers and scientists about "triboluminescence," which is what happens when a sugar crystal is crushed and gives off a (harmless) high voltage spark. I still get inquiries about that segment!

For Science Friday, when we did a story on vaccinations and autism, where I gave one caller ten full minutes about why she believed there was a link between the two. She told me there was no amount of research that could convince her otherwise - "I just don't believe anything the government tells me."

Back in 1978 or so we had a poster of you on the ice in Antarctica, holding an NPR microphone to a penguin. Am I remembering correctly? What were you doing there?

[1Davide](#)

You are remembering it correctly! [I still have the pictures in my office.](#)

The year was 1979. I was visiting Antarctica and Katherine Bouton, who was one of the reporters with me covering science in Antarctica for the New Yorker, saw a line of penguins following closely behind me. She yelled, "Hey Ira, turn around!" I turned around, took out my microphone, and started interviewing them. Most people don't know that Emperor penguins actually sound like elephants trumpeting when they talk, and I wanted to capture some of that sound.

In another event, in my zeal to collect the sound of a melting glacier, I actually slid and fell off the glacier as I lost my footing on the ice! No harm done. And I thanked Sony for having such a sturdy tape recorder.

Hi Ira! I attended one of your live shows at my university and had a blast watching you interview scientists and the local museum curators. Thank you!

My question pertains to those shows. At the end, you were required to read off segments that weren't clear so that the words could be edited in. Are there times when you do the recordings where you redo a whole interview segment or do you decide to remove the entire interview due to voice clarity or perhaps the scientist explains the concept too complicated?

[littlemoondragon](#)

99% of the time, our show is live and broadcast on Fridays. If we're in a studio, we're almost always live (except for the Friday after Thanksgiving). Being a live program, we can't cut out a segment! Although over the course of 25 years and thousands of segments, there are some, to be truthful, I wish we could. Hahah! But it's a damn good track record.

Sometimes, if a segment is not up to par during a live show, it's because the guest is wandering or off track in his or her answer. That's why I try to reel it back in.

Hi Ira,

Can you think of something you've presented where the science has completely reversed itself because of new discoveries?

[liarandathief](#)

Oh yeah! At least two or three times, hahaha!

I'm talking about nutrition and health. Fat used to be bad, now it's good! Smoking used to be good, now it's bad! Believe it or not, there were days back in the 50s where doctors were quoted in advertising saying smoking is good for you.

How did you come to have the largest public radio social media audience? I guess this surprises me a bit.

Thanks!

[psychobeast](#)

First, dirty little secret is, contrary to popular opinion, people love science! So when you give them wonderfully interesting science on Facebook, Twitter, wherever, they're gonna eat it up.

Second, as a science show, we were (brag brag) the first public radio program to be broadcast on the Internet, to create podcasts, and go where no other science show has gone in social media. We are early adopters - I even did a reddit AMA years ago!

Ira! Yuge fan! (Sorry.) Okay...

One of the questions thrown around Reddit seemingly monthly is, "what is the biggest question or problem science cannot answer or does not yet have an answer for?"

Have you ever come across a question or problem for which there is nearly unanimous agreement about \* one weird thing that has science stumped\*?

P=NP...Consciousness...Other life in the universe...?

Also, what's your favorite ice cream flavor?

[Mr. Monster](#)

Yes! Where do the socks go in the laundry? I actually did a show on that, on Science Friday many years ago. No one really knew, and I had laundry room repairmen calling in to give me their opinion.

But seriously folks, I think one of my favorites is what makes up all the dark energy in the universe.

I love chocolate ice cream, though Trader Joes's coffee is a close second...

Are you guys sponsored? How is your show funded and does it affect your program? Or do you have total freedom on what you want to present, if so how do you maintain that? Science Friday radio is neat and the videos you share are pretty cool.

[BluBrowser](#)

We do have total freedom about what we want to present, and we have had to turn down funding offers from corporations for that reason.

We maintain that freedom by separating our fundraising division from our editorial division. The producers do not know where the money is coming from when they create their stories.

Oh man, awesome - I love your show.

I have process questions: how far in advance do you book speakers? How much time do you spend scripting? Editing? How involved are you with that editing?

[elizzybeth](#)

The producers and I have a morning meeting every Monday, and we talk about the topics we'll have on the show. Right after that meeting we'll start booking guests - though when we book authors, they can be booked weeks or months in advanced. If something newsworthy happens during the week, we'll revamp the program and book someone on shorter notice.

The producers start scripting the program on Thursday. I take what they've written Thursday night and finalize it into my own words on Friday. And of course, our interviews are 99% live, so there's no editing after the fact.

Do you expect Einstein's theory of relativity to be proven incorrect as we learn more about quantum field theory?

[ohyoursilly](#)

If you look at history, you'll see that just about every theory we have around today is based on an older theory or a modified older theory, so I imagine someday that relativity will be incorporated into quantum theory. Though it is fun to watch the process... failed to do so... so far...

Newton's Apple shaped who I am as a person. Thank you.

[m1k3tv](#)

Thank YOU! You made my day! I hope you love sweater vests.

How did you get involved with the Ig Nobel awards? Specifically, when did they start chanting your name and why?

[CompSci\\_Guy](#)

Gosh! We've been doing the Ig Nobel awards for as long as I can remember.

I once, back in the day, sat upstairs in the balcony shooting paper airplanes at the stage, was discovered, and the audience started shouting my name. The rest is history.

Hi Ira, my mom has a crush on you and loves the show. It probably represents 90% of her consumption of popular science. Society has become increasingly suspicious of experts. I don't think this is unreasonable if you have paid attention to what "experts" have to say on topics like the economy, nutrition, psychology etc. How do I convince my climate-sceptic/science-denying friends on Facebook to trust science. Do you have any catchy and convincing arguments that make a person sceptical of the scientific status quo re-think what authorities he listens to? Thanks!

[Esvihus](#)

Good question. Also, say hi to your mom for me. Send me a message, I'll send her a pocket protector!

It's very hard to change anyone's mind. It's one of the lessons I have learned from doing this for so many years. If people for religious or political reasons don't want to believe something, no amount of data will convince them.

However, we are learning that friends, whether they be next door neighbors or on Facebook, are among the best catalysts for change. When people hear or see how their friends act, they may question their own actions. It may take some time, but I believe that aside from a paradigm shift - like an ice-free North Pole - changing someone's mind is very difficult to do.

maybe a little off-topic: was the decision to appear on the big bang theory just out of fun or did you also kind of want to promote your radio show? how was the experience?

[sensengassenmann](#)

I was totally surprised. Got a call from the producers who said they wanted to find a call-in radio show that Sheldon could be on, they looked around the room and they all said at once "Science Friday!" That was my first appearance.

Even more shockingly, during my second appearance, they said they wanted to recreate on the set my Science Friday studio and control room. They spared no expense or effort in making a duplicate for it - I was blown away. In fact, during tapings or rehearsals, when I felt lonely or out of place, I retreated to that mock studio, sat down, and felt right at home. It was a great experience, and they were so welcoming and warm. I was only nervous AFTER my appearance. And to this day, I keep running the lines over in my head, thinking how I could have spoken them better.

I'm scrambling for a question, but have to say this: best radio voice EVER.

[zoidbert](#)

Thank you! I have a face for radio.

As a kid, did you want to grow up to host a radio show about science? You seem such a natural at it - was this career the result of a life's dream, or did you just sort of fall into it?

By the way, I love how you are able to get experts on complex subjects to explain their ideas in ways that are easy to understand. Are these communication skills something you have studied extensively, or is it more a combination of natural talent plus experience?

[palad](#)

I sort of fell into it! I never had any ambition to be on the radio. I was studying for an engineering degree in college, wasn't very happy about it, enjoying the campus radio station (WBFO Buffalo). I was lucky enough to be employed by the future creator of *All Things Considered* and founding father of NPR, Bill Siemerling. It was under his tutelage that I found I enjoyed radio more than I did engineering, and eventually after he moved to Washington to start NPR, I nagged him long enough until he finally hired me.

If there was a cabinet position of "Secretary of the Future" who would you want to fill that position?

[TeddyRugby](#)

Stephen King? Margaret Atwood? (She did correctly predict CRISPR...)