

SXSW 2026

A CASE STUDY

by Sarah Wingfield

BRIEF

From all over the world, creatives, scientists, musicians, educators, celebrities, filmmakers, climatologists, engineers, and other culturally and infrastructurally relevant people co-mingle for at least seven days every year in Austin, Texas' downtown area. It is a culmination of ingenuity, genius, creativity, innovation, and good fun.

The SXSW Content Team tells the story, exposes the hot moments, and crafts a narrative around the hustle and bustle of the conference. The Texas State University SXTXST course is designed to support both the SXSW Content Team and Texas State students by creating a setting where students are able to gather and create content and share with the SXSW team for use during and after the main events.

OBJECTIVES

Over a ten-day period in March 2026, graduate and undergraduate students mobilized on the streets of Downtown Austin to encapsulate moments and support the SXSW Content Team's mission. The main directive was to capture content that could be used to create a sense of "FOMO" (fear of missing out). The secondary, but equally important assignment was to attend sessions and track trends along specified tracks within the badge type (music, film & TV, innovation, or EDU).



The Content Team provided both an EDU and innovation badge and assigned coverage of the Climate and Artificial Intelligence (AI) tracks. For the EDU sessions, my objectives were to document engaging moments and activities, film and photograph two merchandise sales locations, and to document the EDU exposition.

Objectives for the main sessions were to document speakers, gather atmospheric content, track trends for both AI and climate tracks, and to cover the Flatstock poster exhibition.

METHODS

Tackling these assignments was somewhat simple considering the vibrant atmosphere, engaging events, and overall pizzazz inherent in the conference. Initially, my approach to gathering atmosphere content was to participate in the EDU workshop sessions. These really helped identify what a session may look like, and which types of moments may be of interest when crafting a feeling of FOMO for those not participating. After the main sessions began, I watched other photographers. Some were confident getting up close to the stages and presenters; others had lenses and equipment that could produce a great up-close image from far away (telephoto, etc.).

When Flatstock came around for documentation and content creation, my focus was to zero-in on the artists' styles and how attendees were interacting with the artists and materials in front of them. Flatstock is not just a showcase but is a vibrant space for artists of all kinds to share in their excitement for craftsmanship. Capturing the lines, colors, set-ups, and human engagement was almost as easy as breathing, though some moments were difficult to capture – as soon as they arrived, they were over.

One tactic I employed for both the EDU and Flatstock exhibitions was to create a timelapse from entering the exhibition, wandering through each corner of the maze of booths, and back to create a sense of excitement, and develop a sense of depth to the length of time someone could choose to spend in these spaces.

The main tools used were my Sony A3500 with both a standard lens and a telephoto lens, as well as my iPhone 13 mini, and a DJI Osmo gimbal. When content was due at a certain time of day, I would determine which would be best: rush to the site to be documented or give it just enough time for other attendees to have filtered in for the crowded look. About 30–45 minutes ahead of the deadline, I would find myself a quiet space to sift through the content gathered, identify the top few photos and videos, and then submit the content raw. Sending raw content would allow the Content Team more control over edits as needed. Once the deadline content was submitted, I would continue about the day, gathering as much content as possible, and upload toward the end of the day after arriving back at home.



As the events progressed, it became more difficult to lean into being creative with coverage – I began putting together a little routine since the climate and AI tracks were mainly just panels with Q&A sessions:

1. Find the angles of the room
2. Photograph speakers taking their seats
3. Get a few wide shots before introductions
4. Take a photo of each speaker during intros
5. Take a few iPhone videos in the portrait orientation for socials while they speak about key topics
6. Photograph from the left
7. Photograph from the right
8. Catch each speaker speaking
9. Catch everyone listening
10. Sit back down, take notes for trends



TRENDS

Several trends surfaced across the sessions attended, including the EDU conference, particularly responsible and conscientious use-cases for Artificial Intelligence, generally in the civic and STEM fields. These spaces seem to lend themselves well to responsible use of AI for positive impact rather than in the creative spaces. Scientific community can be pushed forward due to inhuman amounts of data crunching, predictive models, scenario running, and project management support. AI use in creative spaces is intended to replace swaths of professionals who have spent their lives perfecting their craft, and those using AI to stand in for those human professionals may not have the eye to notice inconsistencies, poor execution, etc.

We are seeing grade-school students affecting change with AI. Several students engaged in Civics Unplugged are leveraging AI to support cancer research, develop emergency management tools, and help mental health professionals identify high risk patients earlier. AI is also being leveraged by adults to revolutionize the way cities rebuild after disasters (or even prevent major damage from disasters) by using digital twins to support reconstruction efforts and to run predictive models to help planners and engineers reduce future risks.

While some folks are mobilizing this new tech to heal the world around them, others are looking to the stars and galaxies and leveraging AI to support our understanding of the known universe. Astronomers across the globe are finding AI is able to help them keep up with the remarkable volume of data collected by their telescopes, process this data, and help them develop a model of the known universe. This type of scientific use-case for AI is likely to support major breakthroughs for the astronomy community.

AI was not the only blaring trend from the attended sessions. One inspiring trend I noticed was just how many of the scientists, engineers, communicators, students, experts, leaders, and other speakers were women. On almost every stage, I noticed either there were no men speaking at all, or they were outnumbered by at least 2 women. This spanned the gamut from the EDU sessions to climate change, water resource management, astronomy, governance, communication, and even filmmaking. Women are leading us through the next major waves of discovery, problem solving, tech, and innovation.



IMPACT

The biggest takeaway from this experience was how to manage a team of content creators, what to post, and when to post content to leverage social media as not just a documentation tool, but a tool for way-finding, timeline updates, and announcements in real-time for large events.

Another key takeaway is what to be documenting - looking back through my content, I am noticing moments for compositional improvements, along with alternative angles that could have been more compelling, etc. Particularly after reviewing the video assignments together, seeing how each person engaged differently with the event has offered a new perspective on agency and interaction while capturing events and developing content.

Assets Used

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