

Inaugural ASU–Science Prize winners use AI to help farmers, trafficking victims

Early-career scientists harness AI to deliver real-world impact at global scale

By Alicia Barrón, ASU News
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From continent-spanning satellite imagery to distributed criminal networks hiding online, some of our most intractable challenges are buried within mountains of data. Two researchers are using artificial intelligence to make sense of such complexity and turn overwhelming datasets into practical solutions.

Their work has earned them honors in the inaugural ASU–Science Prize for Transformational Impact, which recognizes early-career scientists whose use-inspired work addresses pressing world challenges and provides lasting public benefit. The award is a cornerstone of the [AAAS + ASU Collaborative, a five-year partnership between Arizona State University and the American Association for the Advancement of Science](#).

[Meha Jain](#), an associate professor at the University of Michigan, won the grand prize for her use of satellite data and machine learning to examine how small-scale farmers are adapting to climate stressors. Her research, published in [2021](#) and [2023](#), reveals the hidden environmental cost of these adaptations.

For his work to develop an AI-powered search tool to investigate online sex trafficking, [Mayank Kejriwal](#) was named runner-up. Kejriwal is a research associate professor at the University of Southern California.

The pair will be recognized during the AAAS Annual Meeting in Phoenix, where scientists and policymakers are convening to address difficult problems, advance solutions and create scalable knowledge for the public good.

Jain's grand prize-winning essay will be published in the society's flagship peer-reviewed journal, *Science*, both in print and online. Kejriwal's essay will be featured on Science's website. The

grand-prize winner will be awarded \$30,000 while the runner-up receives \$10,000.

A new perspective on smallholder agriculture

Jain's research focuses on helping smallholder farmers grow more food in ways that are both environmentally sustainable and resilient to climate change. Farming systems vary dramatically from place to place, so detailed data on how farms operate are often unavailable, making it difficult to design solutions that work at scale. Jain's work uses high-resolution satellite imagery and AI to better understand how farmers manage their fields and how those choices affect crops, water use and the environment.

As part of her research, Jain partnered with local stakeholders, including farmers, international organizations and government agencies, to ensure she provides data that support informed decision-making.

"We work really closely with local farmers, and that strongly influences the questions that we ask and the data products that we create," said Jain, who earned her PhD from Columbia University. "Having that real-world interaction is incredibly motivating. I became more excited about creating data products that could actually be used."

Scaling up investigation

Kejriwal develops and applies AI to help solve critical societal challenges, from fighting human trafficking to making health care more efficient. His winning search tool helps law enforcement identify and disrupt online sex trafficking.

"It is an honor to be named as a finalist for the ASU–Science Prize for Transformational Impact," said Kejriwal, who received his PhD from the University of Texas at Austin. "It provides validation for our longstanding work on fighting sex trafficking using technology and draws much needed attention to this societal ill."

By collaborating directly with law enforcement, Kejriwal designed an AI system to extract and link obfuscated phone numbers and identifiers across billions of data points to reveal hidden organized crime networks.

Science that serves society

ASU and AAAS joined forces in a first-of-its-kind partnership last year to expand the role of science in society and create new opportunities for the next generation of scientists, engineers and innovators.

Research that matters

From new ways to address cancer to shoring up national

The [AAAS+ASU Collaborative](#) builds on ASU's longstanding commitment to innovation that translates knowledge into action. For decades, ASU has advanced a model of research that empowers bold leaders to confront society's most complex challenges — bringing together diverse disciplines, partners and perspectives to generate solutions with real-world relevance.

At the heart of the collaboration is a shared belief that science is most powerful when it serves the public good. By aligning ASU's science-at-scale approach with AAAS' global reach and leadership in science communication and policy, the partnership amplifies research designed to shape policies and provide solutions that improve people's lives.

The AAAS+ASU Collaborative is [inviting ASU faculty, students and staff](#) to join the AAAS community, expanding opportunities for engagement across the university. The long-term vision is to mobilize scientists and engineers worldwide to advance scientific excellence and strengthen science-informed decisions.

Speakers from ASU are also contributing to the AAAS annual meeting Feb. 12–14 by [participating in sessions](#) that explore how data-driven research and interdisciplinary collaboration can inform policy and drive societal impact.

security to helping Arizonans keep their cool, ASU researchers work to create technologies, medicines and other solutions to the biggest challenges we face.

Learn more at news.asu.edu/research-matters.

Learn more about AAAS Annual Meeting

[ASU brings 'Science @ Scale' to AAAS meeting in Phoenix](#)

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Main image



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Text image(s)



Meha Jain, the inaugural winner of the ASU–Science Prize for Transformational Impact. Photo courtesy of Meha Jain