
Inside the AMS

A Summer at Voice of America

Each year the AMS sponsors a fellow to participate in the Mass Media Fellowship program of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. This program places science and mathematics graduate students in summer internships at media outlets. In the piece below, the 2003 AMS fellow, Claudia A. Clark of Northeastern University, describes her experiences during her fellowship at Voice of America. For information about applying for the fellowship, see the October 2003 issue of the Notices, page 1102, or visit the website <http://ehrweb.aaas.org/massmedia.htm>.

It was already warm when I entered the building in Dupont Circle to attend the 9:00 a.m. press conference at the Earth Policy Institute. After all, it was late June in Washington, DC. But when I left the building over an hour later, I hardly noticed the increased heat and humidity. I'd just recorded a press conference for the first time on my own and had asked the questions I'd come to ask. I was heading back to my office at Voice of America (VOA), where I would use this and subsequent interviews to produce my first radio piece: a four-minute "backgrounder" (in radio terminology) on wind power. And I couldn't have been happier.

More than six months earlier I had read about the ten-week AMS-AAAS Mass Media Science and Engineering Fellowship in an *AMS Member Newsletter*. I was intrigued by the idea of being a bridge between the world of science and the public, as well as by the opportunity to work in the media. This seemed like a natural extension of my interest in mathematics and science, my enjoyment of writing and teaching, my love of learning, and a deep curiosity about what makes people tick. To my delight, I was offered a fellowship in radio—my first choice—at VOA in Washington, DC.

The summer began with a three-day orientation at the headquarters of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). I attended workshops on pitching story ideas, interviewing people, and writing news pieces; and toured the nearby National Public Radio offices and studios. Besides meeting the other fellows, I met VOA's science editor and my mentor for the summer, David McAlary, as well as Sam Rankin of the AMS Washington, DC, office. A few days later the fellowship began.

David trained me to use all of the hardware and software I would need to record interviews or press conferences and to produce news stories for broadcast. After attending a few press conferences together with David and

establishing accounts with a few news services that summarized the latest science news, I was ready to go!

Since David was often busy working on his own stories, I generally had both the luxury and the challenge of setting my own agenda. This started with pitching stories, which had to be relevant to our global audience. The first story I pitched that was accepted focused on the results of a recent study on wind power. After a few weeks reading the study, researching wind power, and interviewing one of the study's authors—which might take my experienced colleagues a few hours—I thought I was ready to write the piece. At this point I got my first lesson in journalistic objectivity: I needed to interview someone whose conclusions differed from those of this researcher. This was one of the many valuable lessons impressed upon me by more than one colleague at VOA: no one listening to your report should be able to tell what you, the writer, believe. Contrasting points of view are more than a means to add drama.

After interviewing a spokesperson from a trade association of U.S. electric power suppliers, I began to write. This was the most frustrating, creative, and rewarding part of the process for me. First of all, I had to tell a compelling story in a very short period of time (although four minutes is considered to be a very long time in radio). Yes, I was writing about science, but the audience responds to what it can relate to: the humans involved and their emotions, such as excitement or disappointment. Since I found that people generally love talking about their work, radio is a wonderful medium for science reporting: you can convey not only the interviewee's thoughts but also his or her feelings.

However, it must be done effectively. I was warned not to automatically use quotes like "This was a very exciting result!" but to use the interviewee's words to summarize or emphasize the important points. It was my job to explain the details in concise, accurate, "visual" and understandable language, because the listener has only one chance to hear it: in David's words, I had to "write for the ear." After numerous rewrites and final editorial approval, the piece was ready to be "voiced" by David: read and recorded. I produced the piece, putting the recorded text, the "sound bites", and any sound effects together to make the finished product, "Winds of Change".

The second piece that I wrote, at David's suggestion, was the most demanding because of the highly technical nature of the material. This "backgrounder" focused on a

recently published paper about a technique of using very short, low-energy laser pulses and the fluorescent properties of certain chemicals in the body to perform noninvasive biopsies. It was a challenge to get the researchers to explain the technique in simple terms so that I could understand it and explain it to the audience using the researchers' own words.

After much editing and a few suggestions from one of the paper's authors, I produced the piece "Bloodless Biopsies". I was rewarded with compliments from an editor, who said it was one of the best medical pieces she'd seen in a long time, and from one of the researchers, who said I'd done a great job making this very complicated material understandable.

My third and final story was on a paper that used a mathematical model to determine the most effective way to halt the spread of SARS. Titled "Soap Fights SARS", this piece was my most serious; I was talking about something that killed people. However, writing and producing this story took me the least amount of time: the subject matter was more familiar to me (mathematics), and I was getting more experienced with the process.

In addition to completing these three pieces, I worked on other projects, including recording a press conference on the improved condition of the ozone layer and discussing solar sailing with NASA scientists.

This summer was an inspirational experience. I got to know some of the other newsroom correspondents, who were fascinating and helpful. I was constantly pushed to try new things, take risks, and learn from the mistakes I made. I experienced the responsibility and the opportunity that journalists have to tell the stories and to get them right and came away deciding to pursue science journalism as a career.

The hunger for science news is there: it came from other "language services" at VOA, who wanted more science news to translate and broadcast to their own countries, and the South African journalists I interviewed at AAAS who were training to be science journalists. The need for science news is there. As California Congressman Bob Filner, who has a Ph.D. in the history of science, said when I interviewed him at an AMS Congressional Briefing in Washington: "We live in a society which is dominated by science and technology and yet 99 percent of the population and 99.5 percent of the policymakers know nothing about science and technology... We cannot make intelligent decisions unless we have a broader sense of what's going on." I'm there.

—Claudia A. Clark

Corrections to the 2003 Annual Survey of the Mathematical Sciences (First Report)

An incorrect percentage was quoted in the "Highlights" on page 219 of the February 2004 issue of the *Notices of the AMS*. The correct percentage (49%) appears in the last line of the quote below:

Group IV produced 239 new doctorates, of which 98 (41%) are females, compared to all other groups combined, where 206 (26%) are females. In group IV 109 (46%) of the new doctoral recipients are U.S. citizens (while in the other groups 49% are U.S. citizens).

Table 3 on page 220 should have reported total full-time graduate students for 2002 as 9,972 (the figure 997 appeared incorrectly in the printed table).

Correction: von Neumann Awards

The January 2004 issue of the *Notices*, page 52, carried a report about the AMS participation in the Budapest celebration of the 100th anniversary of the birth of John von Neumann. The report gave an incomplete list of the recipients of the first John von Neumann Awards. In addition to Marina von Neumann Whitman and Charles Simonyi, George Dyson received one of the awards for his historical research on von Neumann and the computer. Dyson is the author of *Darwin among the Machines: The Evolution of Global Intelligence*. The *Notices* thanks John Ball, who attended the celebration as president of the International Mathematical Union, for pointing out this omission.

—Allyn Jackson

Deaths of AMS Members

JOSE F. ESCOBAR, of Cornell University, died on January 3, 2004. Born on December 20, 1954, he was a member of the Society for 20 years.

ABRAHAM P. HILLMAN, professor emeritus, University of New Mexico, died on January 19, 2004. Born on December 18, 1918, he was a member of the Society for 63 years.

RICHARD A. LEIBLER, retired, from Reston, VA, died on October 25, 2003. Born on March 18, 1914, he was a member of the Society for 66 years.

DAN LORENZ, of Technion-Israel Institute of Technology, died on January 25, 2001. Born on June 29, 1931, he was a member of the Society for 42 years.

MEIR REICHAW, professor emeritus, Technion-Israel Institute of Technology, died on February 28, 2000. Born on December 20, 1923, he was a member of the Society for 38 years.

NINA M. ROY, professor emeritus, from Rosemont, PA, died on December 25, 2003. Born on November 5, 1931, she was a member of the Society for 32 years.

WILLIAM STRANGE, retired, U. S. Naval Academy, died on October 13, 2003. Born on June 19, 1918, he was a member of the Society for 62 years.

JACK WILLIAMSON, retired, University of Hawaii, died on October 15, 2003. Born on November 21, 1940, he was a member of the Society for 36 years.