

My Summer at the Voice of America

Adriana Salerno

*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 article below, the 2007 Fellow, Adriana Salerno of the University of Texas, Austin, describes her experiences during her fellowship at Voice of America. For information about applying for the fellowship, see the January 2008 issue of the Notices, page 62, or visit the website <http://www.ehrweb.aaas.org/massmedia.htm>. The application deadline is **January 15, 2008**.*

—Allyn Jackson

Every college freshman is faced with an important decision: what to major in. In my case, I believe it was a rather unusual set of alternatives. I didn't know if I wanted to study math or communications. I had the opportunity to study either, which made the decision even harder. It is probably clear to anyone reading this what choice I made, but the decision was based on practicality rather than preference. My rationale was that if I ever changed my mind or realized I had made the wrong decision, it would be much easier to switch from math to communications than the other way around. I figured that after many years of not doing math I wouldn't be able to pick it up very easily, but I would always be interested in reading and writing and therefore keep developing good communication skills.

It was evident to me, the more I got into math, that the connection between people who do math and everyone else was broken. To "outsiders", mathematics seemed to work much like a secret society that allowed in only certain privileged people (sometimes referred to as geniuses). I then started fantasizing about being able to bridge that gap, expose our society, but I didn't really know how. The idea that I could be a communicator and a mathematician at the same time never crossed my mind. When I saw the announcement for the AAAS/AMS Mass Media Fellowship it was like having an epiphany; it felt almost as though it was meant to be. I definitely wanted to give it a try. My advisor was very supportive so I went for it.

Fast forward five months, and there I am, walking through security of a government building in Washington, DC, on my way to my first meeting with all the writers and editors of the English Features department at the Voice of America (VOA). I wasn't familiar with the VOA, and soon after


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receiving the announcement that I had won the fellowship I figured out why: it is a government-run radio station that broadcasts internationally but not inside the United States.

I was assigned to write English language features, which are 4- to 5-minute long stories. The best thing about this format is that it allowed me to research topics more deeply and slowly than I could have were I writing short news updates. I quickly learned that there were three possible ways in which my stories could be used: they could air with a science news magazine called *Our World* (and by magazine I mean a radio program presenting short segments on a variety of topics); they could be aired together with the English news broadcast; or they could be picked up by one of the many language services, translated, and aired with their own news broadcasts.


The fellowship was billed as a science journalism fellowship, so I was supposed to report on all sorts of science topics. But I admit that my goal from the beginning was to try to get as many stories about math on the air as I could. My editor, Rob Sivak, was a little hesitant at first because he felt I was operating in my comfort zone, but after a while it was evident to both him and me that talking about math on the radio was possibly the hardest thing to do. I was lucky that most of the math ideas I pitched to Rob were accepted. I think he also wanted to see what I could do.

My first math story was about Raghu Varadhan, the 2007 Abel Prize winner. This one was received very positively by Rob because it was about a mathematician, not so much about math, and because Varadhan is from India and we have many listeners there. He was great to interview and I think the piece was one of my best. The main challenge I encountered was "voicing" the piece—that is, reading it for radio. It was only the second piece I had voiced, and I was still pretty terrible at it.




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It took about six tries of reading the whole thing through until Rob agreed to “publish it” (i.e., make it available to the different outlets I mentioned earlier). I was happy to be given the opportunity to read the pieces I wrote, I felt that they were more my own. I also loved that Rob wouldn’t let me get away with mediocre readings and that he treated me as if I was a regular employee, not just the resident math nerd who’s trying her hand at something different.

I learned that for the VOA one really needed to think about the international appeal of stories. Once I pitched a story about how drinking too much water might be harmful for athletes, and soon it was pointed out that many of our listeners might not be too concerned about runners who drink *too much* water...For our stories to be as relevant to someone in Washington, DC, as to someone in Africa, we had to write in a way that transcended cultural and language barriers. Doing so enabled me to see things from a different, less local perspective and gave me a sense of what is really important to communicate.

My math pieces were easily separated into two categories: the first focused on a more human angle of math, like the story on Varadhan, which was mostly a biography, and the story about the first U.S. team to go to the China Girls Math Olympiad, which focused on issues of girls and mathematics; the second was more geared towards applications of math, and in this category were the story about how optimal control theory (I had to fight to use those words in my story) can be used to model the growth of tumors, and the story about Keith Devlin and Gary Lorden’s new book, *The Numbers Behind NUMB3RS*, about how math can be used in crime-solving in real life, and in fiction. I was able to show our listeners a glimpse of what the people who do math are like and what math can be good for.

I really appreciated the chance to learn about things I knew nothing about before the summer (nanotechnology, chimp cognition, acoustics, number symbolism, and bird flu vaccines) and talking to really interesting people (like Ian Stewart, one of my idols). But I must say that the best thing about the experience is that I succeeded in achieving my goal to some extent: I got mathematics on the air, and in fact to the whole world.

I have now realized that the choice I made a few years ago was not as life-changing as I thought: I picked math, and through a process that seems almost too serendipitous to be true, I found my way back to communications. I now also have a completely new perspective on what it is I might want to do. I still love math and hope to be doing research in the future, but I want to try to combine it with my love of explaining math to others. I feel my experience this summer was definitely the best way to get my foot in the door.