

# Fellowship highlights need for science communicators

Mass Media internships provide new careers and skills

By **Becky Ham**

The 47th class of Mass Media Science & Technology Fellows heading out to newsrooms around the country this summer is part of one of the oldest ongoing science communication initiatives by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS).

Since 1975, more than 750 scientists, engineers, and mathematicians in the fellowship have spent 10 weeks reporting and writing news stories at media outlets around the US. For the participants, the program is a way to explore a new career or improve their science communication skills. But alumni and AAAS staff say the fellowship also expands the public audience for scientific news.

"Journalism, writing, communicating about science—these are all critical for shaping public understanding of the world around us," said AAAS CEO Sudip Parikh to the newest fellowship class on 2 June.

The program has several alumni who made the switch from science to journalism after the fellowship. David Kestenbaum, a former correspondent for National Public Radio and now senior editor at This American Life, got his start in radio as a 1997 Mass Media fellow. At the time, he was a physics researcher at Fermilab, but the writing life beckoned.

"I did have this feeling, looking at press coverage of particle physics that I was doing, that it seemed very sterile and disconnected from the real lives of what it was like to actually do the science...this isn't actually getting at the craziness of it," he recalled at the orientation for the 2021 fellows. "And so I had some idea that I could bring something different to it."

Other fellows continued their academic careers. Johanna Varner, an assistant professor of biology at Colorado Mesa University, had considered switching to journalism during her 2015 summer working at KQED Science but took a teaching position instead. During the fellowship, she learned film production and storytelling skills that she uses in her teaching, especially with students who aren't science majors.

"I think having done the Mass Media fellowship is one of the most valuable experiences that I have ever had," said Varner, who received AAAS's 2018 Early Career Award for Public Engagement with Science for her citizen science initiatives and serves as a AAAS IF/THEN Ambassador.

"I think that it made me a better teacher, it made me better as a scientist trying to portray my own research in the media in a way that I will be happy with, and it gave me the skills to teach students to be more informed consumers of news and media," she said.

## Screeners needed for journalism awards

Scientists from the United States and abroad are needed to review the scientific accuracy of entries in the prestigious AAAS Kavli Science Journalism Awards competition. The screening sessions in late August and September will be online this year, opening them to participation by scientists beyond the Washington, DC, area. We need additional screeners with expertise in virology, epidemiology, and public health. If you can volunteer, please contact Emily Hughes at [ehughes@aaas.org](mailto:ehughes@aaas.org).

The fellowship program has expanded into online video sites and Spanish-language media and has made a concerted effort to place fellows in newsrooms outside of the East and West Coasts, said program director Kristin Lewis.

"Local journalism is one of the places where this fellowship really shines," Lewis said, since these smaller media outlets may not have dedicated science writers on staff or resources to cover science stories.

She recalled a story from 2019 fellow Jerald Pinson at *The Austin American-Statesman*, who covered a toxic outbreak of blue-green algae in Lady Bird Lake. "With him, they had an ecologist in-house who could understand what was going on, speak to the experts, and really be able to translate that story for the local community," said Lewis.

The fellowship brings science content to new audiences in this way, she added. "The people who are reading *Scientific American* or *Wired* are seeking out science news, generally. The people who are reading your local paper might not be, they might just be looking for the news that is local to them. And so if we can find ways to make those science stories relevant to local audiences, the better."

Relevant storytelling is one of the things that fellows learn during their summer—"how to write stories with science in them as opposed to 'science stories,'" said Bill Manny, a former community engagement editor with the *Idaho Statesman*, who supervised 2018 fellow Kevin Davenport at the newspaper.

Davenport wrote about everything from bird migration to interstate accidents, figuring out "how you can use a science perspective and a science background on just good basic journalism," Manny said.

Throwing off the mantle of "scientist" can be difficult in unexpected ways, said Katherine Wu, a 2018 alumna who is now a staff writer at *The Atlantic*. "I think one thing that wasn't immediately intuitive to me was that when I became a journalist, I no longer wanted to identify as a science communicator," she told the 2021 fellows. "I didn't want to position myself as a scientist championing the institution of science, I wanted to portray reality as it was [and] try to put a more objective lens on the way that I was approaching all of these things."

Neal Baer, a 1983 alumnus and pediatrician who spent his internship at WEWS-TV, has continued to work in both media and academia. His career includes stints as a television writer and producer on ER, Law & Order: Special Victims Unit, and Designated Survivor, among other shows. He also lectures at Harvard Medical School and contributes to scientific journals. Baer is sponsoring the 2021 AAAS Diverse Voices in Science Journalism Internship.

"I think I'm able to apply those two worlds to my work, the academic world that I was in for so long, and also this world where people have dialogue, and so it's not, to me, that wholly different," said Baer at the orientation. "It's always about telling stories grounded in science."

Last year, AAAS partnered with science journalism nonprofit The Open Notebook to create a 6-month mentorship program for the 2020 fellows, who missed out on some of the usual newsroom networking and guidance due to COVID-19 restrictions. Lewis said that the fellowship would like to continue the program if financial support is available.

"The pandemic of the past year has only served to heighten the importance of accurate science journalism," Lewis said, "so this is a particularly relevant fellowship that AAAS is funding at the moment."

# Science

## Fellowship highlights need for science communicators

Becky Ham

*Science* **372** (6549), 1404.

DOI: 10.1126/science.372.6549.1404-a

### ARTICLE TOOLS

<http://science.sciencemag.org/content/372/6549/1404.1>

### PERMISSIONS

<http://www.sciencemag.org/help/reprints-and-permissions>

Use of this article is subject to the [Terms of Service](#)

---

*Science* (print ISSN 0036-8075; online ISSN 1095-9203) is published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1200 New York Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20005. The title *Science* is a registered trademark of AAAS.

Copyright © 2021 The Authors, some rights reserved; exclusive licensee American Association for the Advancement of Science. No claim to original U.S. Government Works