

2013 AAAS SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING MASS MEDIA FELLOW

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ENVIRONMENTAL EARTH SYSTEM
SCIENCE

SCHOOL: STANFORD UNIVERSITY

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Research Focus: Stable isotope geochemistry and coral paleoclimatology

Translation: I use coral records (sort of like tree rings) to reconstruct El Nino and La Nina activity over the past few hundred years. In the 1980s and 90s we had a few really strong El Nino events, and there's been speculation that the increase in El Nino activity may be somehow related to global warming. No one really knows, though, because our records of El Nino activity only go back to about 1950 or so. Also, the climate models generally do a bad job capturing El Ninos and La Ninas. The point of my work is to get a baseline of natural variability (before humans started pumping CO2 in the atmosphere), so that we can better understand how global warming may impact the El Nino system.

What are your goals for the summer?

I have a lot of goals, but my number one goal is to become a better radio producer. I want to learn how to craft short radio stories. Beyond that, I want to find creative ways to weave science into stories that people might now otherwise think of as "science stories."

What are you most excited about?

I'm most excited about working with a team of professionals. PhD work can be lonely, and the science communication work I've done thus far has been with friends for fun. I'm very curious to see what the office environment is like at a professional operation.

Why are you passionate about science communication?

Science matters in ways we take for granted. Scientific breakthroughs are exciting because they represent new

ways of thinking. I'm a conversational dude, so I love to learn new ideas. That's simple, I guess, but it's true. Learning is a pleasure.

Who is your favorite science communicator?

There's no one person who leaps to mind. I think Keith Kloor at Discover is great, and I've become a big fan of Bryan Walsh at Time lately. I have deep respect for Neil Degrasse Tyson, though I think he can come off as arrogant at times. Richard Alley is fantastic, but, then again, I'm a geologist. I like John McPhee for the same reason. And of course you have to tip your hat to the folks at Radiolab. Actually I am more of a fan of certain institutions and outlets than I am a fan of specific people. I like anyone who sparks my imagination and presents new information in an entertaining way.

Do you have a link to an article you'd like to share?

Sure: <http://grist.org/climate-energy/apocalypse-now-climate-change-is-going-to-kick-our-asses/>

Describe your dream job.

Yikes. What do I want to be when I grow up? No idea. Quality of life is key, so location and community matter just as much as vocation. I want to earn an honest salary, but I'm not greedy. I suppose what matters most is that I'm somewhere that allows me a certain amount of intellectual and creative freedom. I'm a naturally hard worker when I'm inspired, and I like the idea of having control over my professional pursuits. I have a tendency to be obsessive, so I think it's important for that to be channeled in a healthy way. I could see myself in either media or in academia. The truth of the matter is that both media and academia are institutions undergoing rapid evolution in the digital age. I suppose I equivocate on dream-job question because I'm not sure what the landscape will look like when it's time to choose a path, though I'm comfortable making a game-time decision.



The more simple answer is that I want to be a producer, and probably an audio/radio producer. New technologies are cool too, and I could see enjoying multimedia production. I just want to tell stories.

Tell us about some things you do outside of the lab.

The WTF podcast with Marc Maron is my all time favorite podcast. The success of Maron's podcast is itself a great story (he was a failed stand-up comic who turned his career/life around by starting a podcast—google "Marc Maron and NYT" for more). Every interview he

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does is a gem to me. Maron is DEEPLY empathetic, and he's made me realize how important that quality is for a good interviewer. He has a tenacious need to connect with his subjects, and I always find his perspective on the world enlightening. Terry Gross, Charlie Rose, and the late Tim Russert are fantastic case studies, but Maron is my current interviewing hero because he's shown how the podcast medium is different than traditional media. I love audio podcasts because they represent the democratization of audio. I also love the way they develop cult followings around niche interests. Personally I think there's a market out there for a new and different kind of science podcast. I'd like to do for science podcasts what Marc Maron did for comedy podcasts, though I think there's a long way to go and a lot of room for experimentation.

Anything else you'd like to share?

I once survived a car crash while sitting in the backseat of a stolen car. I didn't steal the car, nor did I crash it. In fact, the whole incident came about by accident. Wait—who's reading this? Is this just Dione, or is this being circulated widely? Oh, who cares I guess. I'm always down for telling my stolen car story. Maybe a better anecdote to share is that I once met the guy who Dick Cheney shot. We didn't talk about the shooting, but I can say that his face was pockmarked. I don't know if it was like that before their hunting accident or not. Anyway, that's my best and shortest celebrity-citing story.