

IEEE Information Theory Society Newsletter



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President's Column

Elza Erkip

Summer is almost here, and by the time you read this, hopefully summer will be in the Northern Hemisphere. Many people look forward to summer; it is synonymous with fun, relaxation, long and lazy days at the beach. For information theorists, summer is also synonymous with our flagship conference International Symposium on Information Theory (ISIT). I think many of you will agree that we have the best job in the world: Not only do we work in a field that we love, but we also get to travel to beautiful places, meet friends and learn new things, all as part of our jobs! So, no wonder we look forward to ISIT (and maybe some, like me, also look forward to beach time after the conference).



This year ISIT is in Vail, Colorado, in the beautiful Rocky Mountains. Thinking about ISIT in Vail, I cannot help but remember ISIT 1995 in Whistler, British Columbia. It was one of my early ISITs, and I was a PhD student. While I attended sessions, my boyfriend, who was doing his PhD in statistics, enjoyed walking, hiking and various other summer activities in Whistler. And being a graduate student, he also wanted to take advantage of the Spouse Breakfast (free food!). Unfortunately, he was almost kicked out, as no one would believe he was a "spouse" and not a conference participant. Luckily, one of my office mates' wife vouched for him, and he ended up meeting many of the spouses attending the breakfast. This meant that for the rest of the week, while I was exchanging greetings with the well-known senior people of the field, he was doing the same with their wives.

Times have changed since 1995, and now we have more women in the society. We even get to have our own free food at Women in Information Theory (WITHITS) events, which, by the way, is open to everyone. We would love to see more men attending WITHITS events, after all women's issues also benefit from diverse viewpoints (and did I say there is free food?).

While our society has made progress on participation of women, we still have a long way to go. For example, there are no women among the 125 authors of the 64 papers which won the Information Theory Paper Award since its inception in 1962. Even when we look at the Jack Keil Wolf ISIT Student Paper Award, which targets a younger, and, presumably, more diverse demographic, we see that none of the 32 award winning papers have been authored or co-authored by a woman student. Diversity includes, but is not limited to, gender diversity. The recently formed Information Theory Society Ad-Hoc Committee on Diversity and Inclusion is currently collecting statistics on society awards, committees, conferences, schools, and looking into ways of ensuring a

broader, more diverse participation and representation in society awards and events. I would like to thank Stark Draper, Sid Jaggi, Tara Javidi, Muriel Médard and Emanuele Viterbo for agreeing to serve on the committee, which I am chairing. We plan to present our first report at the Board of Governors meeting in Vail, and hope to summarize our activities in a future Newsletter article.

In the last President's Column, I mentioned the society's five-year IEEE review. We provided the IEEE with a detailed report in January, and had a face-to-face meeting with IEEE's Society and Council Review Committee (SCRC) in February. In late March, we received feedback from the IEEE. The SCRC was quite positive in its response, and had several constructive comments on the society governance, strategy and operations, publications and finances. In addition, I am happy to report that the following two items were included in the SCRC's list of "Society and Council Effective Practices":

- A children's book entitled "Information in Small Bits" has been produced by Anna Scaglione and Christina Fragouli. The first copies will be distributed to Information Theory

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Society members during the yearly Information Theory and Applications (ITA) conference in San Diego in February 2018. A wider distribution (most likely via Amazon) is in preparation. The SCRC considers this a best practice because it is an impressive way to reach out to the younger generation and educate them in engineering. The SCRC believes that this is the youngest targeted audience future member recruitment by a society or council yet.

- The Society Outreach Subcommittee organizes mentor/mentee pairs, but also group mentoring with round table mentoring events at Society activities. Society group mentor events staff 10-15 tables with a mentor focused on topics of interest to junior members. These events attract well over 100 attendees. The SCRC considers this unique approach to group mentoring at round table events as a best practice because of the variety of topics, multiple experts available, casual face-to-face conversations, and the overall networking and learning opportunities with mentors and peers.

I would like to thank Anna Scaglione and Christina Fragouli for leading the children's book project, and Aaron Wagner and Joerg Kliewer for starting the group mentoring events during their tenure as the Outreach Subcommittee Co-Chairs.

For me, one of the highlights of being the President of Information Theory Society is the Awards Ceremony at ISIT, where I will get a chance to personally congratulate winners of various society awards and recognize the many volunteers whose terms have ended. We will also celebrate the accomplishments of society members who received IEEE level awards in 2018. As in past few years, we are keeping the identity of the 2018 Aaron D. Wyner Distinguished Award recipient as a surprise. Two more surprises come during the banquet where I will have the pleasure of announcing the 2019 Claude E. Shannon Award winner, and Emina Soljanin, society Vice President, will announce the winners of the 2019 Jack Keil Wolf ISIT Student Paper Award.

I am happy to hear from all of you; please feel free to contact me at elza@nyu.edu.