**LifeSciences**Communicator

Research Leader in Science Communication


Summer
2009

# meet Dominique **Brossard**

by Jerry STOECKLEIN

Current LSC Masters Student

Associate Professor Dominique Brossard is LSC's newest faculty member. Joining the department after four years with the UW School of Journalism and Mass Communication, she brings with her an impressive list of credentials including over two dozen published articles, nine research awards and six teaching awards.

"This is a great place to be," says Brossard of her new home in LSC. Several LCS faculty members have already had the pleasure of working with Brossard, and the move brings her into a team with similar research interests. Brossard's research broadly focuses on strategic communication in the context of science.

Brossard did not start out in science communication, however. Her first MS was in Plant Biotechnology at Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Agronomie de Toulouse in France. She then ventured into industry working for Accenture, a global consulting company.

While working with public health and environmental issues, Brossard became interested in science communication. She decided to go back to graduate school. She attended Cornell University, earning a PhD in communications. "I liked understanding how people function much more than working with test tubes," says Brossard.

Brossard's dissertation focused on public perceptions of biotechnology and genetically modified food, testing a model to explain public participation for controversial science. After her PhD, she joined the Agricultural Biotechnology Support Program II (ABSPII). The goal of this multi-million dollar project was to make genetically modified (GM) products available to the poorest countries at affordable prices, while helping these countries build capacity to develop their own GM crops.


Dominique Brossard

"I liked understanding how people function much more than working with test tubes."

"It was a great project and I got to travel a lot… maybe too much," says Brossard, who worked in Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines India, Uganda, Mali and South Africa for the project. The humanitarian aspect of her work with ABSPII seems to have stayed with Brossard, who has remained active in outreach throughout her career, including extracurricular work with students and various organizations.

Brossard's research today continues to focus on public opinion and media effects in the context of controversial science. New and emerging technologies, like biotechnology and stem cells, intrigue Brossard for their ethical, legal and social components.

"I want to understand how controversies about new technology emerge," says Brossard, who is now focusing on nanotechnology. She is leading a group that is part of UW-Madison's Nanoscale Science and Engineering Center. Her group is focusing on the societal implications of nanotechnology, and more particularly on what goes on in the online world.

Brossard is also exploring the role people's values play in determining how they feel about emerging technologies. "Deference to science and deference to religious institutions are helping people make sense of emerging technologies," she says

Although she says a lot of her work is basic research, it is important because it can be applied to policy and decision-making.

"I don't like to do research that's going to ultimately stay completely disconnected from real life," explains Brossard.

Brossard is also continuing her work on agricultural biotechnology. She participated last November in a workshop that is culminating with a book exploring the role of biotechnology in a sustainable food supply. Her chapter is on the social and political challenges posed by agricultural biotechnology. This will be one of five published book chapters for Brossard.

Brossard brings value to LSC in the form of engaging and cutting edge research. She feels that LSC and CALS provide the right atmosphere for her mission.

"People often ask me, if I have all those international connections and I've lived all around the world, why would I end up in Madison?" Brossard has a quick answer. "I say because of UW-Madison, CALS, LSC. This is really a great place, one of a kind. It's a great university, a great research institution with great students. Nothing beats that."


Jacquie Hitchon McSweeney

# a word from **the chair...**

Dear members of LSC,

This issue goes to press as Madison emerges from a long winter followed by a very cool spring. Commencement produced graduation parties that were planned as barbeques, and yet left friends and family members flocking into the warmth of kitchens rather than huddling outside in festive summer clothing.

Hiram Smith Hall has weathered its first full winter post renovation, and LSC endured hiccups as a 1892 building geared up to house approximately 300 residents in an extended cold season, most of whom were unraveling scarves and discarding down jackets in order to attend classes or check email in a student lounge. Despite some heating inequities, the building has acquired celebrity status for embodying so much history while also embracing new communication technology - and at least some heating! We are very happy in our new home.

We are delighted to welcome Dominique Brossard as a new faculty member. You will read about her in this issue. Her exemplary record was such that we submitted her dossier for tenure early, and she joins us as associate professor. In the last six months, we have also seen LSC Professor Dietram Scheufele receive the prestigious Pound Research award from CALS. Earning this distinction as a social scientist in a college where natural scientists predominate is no mean feat! Congratulations, Dietram!

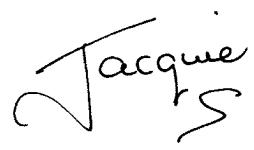
LSC dissertator Lali Abril earned one of just three Graduate Research Fellowships awarded by CALS, and LSC graduate student Andy Binder received a campus Peer Mentor Award for all the work that he has engaged in behind the scenes to advise less experienced graduate students. Master's candidate, Noel Benedetti, provides a detailed glimpse into the life of an LSC graduate student in this issue; please note that she competed for and won an industry-wide award. Advising graduate students who are determined to excel is one of the most rewarding aspects of being an LSC faculty member.

Other highlights this year include a campus-wide assessment of the impact of UW-Madison faculty's research on public opinion. LSC's Dietram Scheufele and Bret Shaw were both identified as among the dozen UW-Madison faculty who garner the most media coverage of their research. In this way, they exemplify the Wisconsin Idea, bringing national and even international attention to the real-world contributions of their scholarship.

In the realm of LSC undergraduates, the student chapter of the National Agri-Marketing Association returned triumphantly from the national competition, having earned outstanding recognition across many categories of distinction. My thanks go to Sarah Botham for her continued dedication and skilled guidance as NAMA advisor. Then at this year's Recognition Reception, where we bring together scholarship recipients, their families and donors, more awards went to LSC majors than ever before.

I am delighted to be able to share these highlights with you. In these difficult economic times, it is particularly important to focus on what we are accomplishing. I promise you that we continue to provide our students with the best educational experience that we can, in order to equip them to succeed. Hearing from alumnus John Brien in this issue serves to remind all of us of how far across the globe LSC's influence extends.

Have a great summer!



# adventures **after Madison**

by John BRIEN
Communication Educator
MS 1959

*After graduating with a Master's of Science from the University of Wisconsin in 1959, John Brien visited extension editors in Iowa, Kansas, Missouri and Illinois, culminating in discussions with Dr. Lyle Webster in the USDA in Washington, DC. He then pursued an international career in science communication that he sums up in his own words: "All this stems from my time in Madison fifty years ago!"*

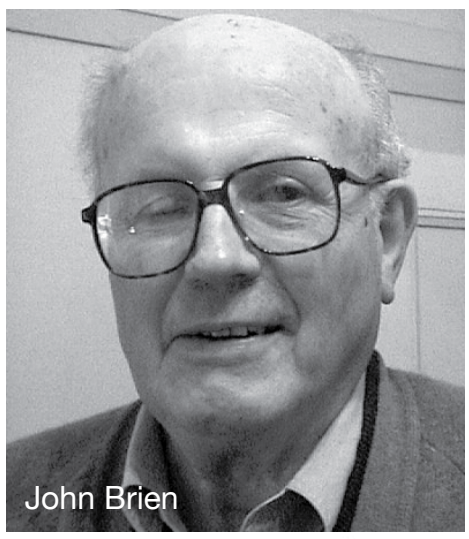
"Following a visit to the UK, I returned to Australia to rejoin the Information Branch in the Victorian Department of Agriculture in Melbourne. This highly productive unit produced a variety of agricultural publications, radio programs and films.

By the early 1960s, I had begun rudimentary communication research. By the late 1960s, I was invited to evaluate an experimental adult education project at the University of New England. The 1970s saw me at the University of Sydney to begin teaching and research there in agricultural extension and communication. In 1975, I received an invitation from Dr. Wilbur Schramm at the East-West Center to participate in a conference on Communication in Agricultural Development. By the latter part of the decade, I was to serve as chair of the research part of the US National Agricultural Science Information Conference at Iowa State University, the invitation coming from Dr. Mason Miller, Chief Communication Scientist at the USDA.

In 1980, I went to work with Dr. Tom Hargrove, head of information, at the International Rice Research Institute, Los Banos, Philippines, one of the world's outstanding scientific research centers. Among many outcomes, this work resulted in the development and subsequent award of my PhD with dissertation, entitled "Knowledge Utilization: International Agricultural Research Communication." I undertook further international work as a Fellow at the East-West Center, presenting papers at international conferences and conducting consultancies in the Asia Pacific for bodies such as the Asian Development Bank and AusAID.

My connection with the University of Wisconsin never waned. I was appointed Visiting Professor of Agricultural Journalism in 1976, and 10 years later, Vice Chancellor and Professor Bryant Kearl, former chair of the Department of Agricultural Journalism, came to the University of Sydney to conduct research in agricultural communication with me. Then in 1999, then Chancellor Dr. David Ward invited me to give a paper at an alumni convocation.

Recently, I was awarded the degree of Doctor of Agricultural Science by the University of Queensland. This is known as a Higher Doctoral Degree in Australia with a dissertation comprising an extensive compilation of published scientific papers. I have also just been appointed Adjunct Professor at Charles Sturt University."


John Brien

*It is wonderful to hear from you, John, and to be able to share your news with LSC alumni in the Communicator. Contact John directly at dr_john_p_brien@hotmail.com.*

*On Wisconsin!*

# taking comics **seriously**

by Camille ROGERS
Current LSC Masters Student

LSC is home to such well-known media figures as WPR personality Larry Meiller and WPT documentary producer Patty Loew, and so it is easy for a student to feel outfaced. Not so for Noel Benedetti. She's a part-time filmmaker, part-time radio host, part-time graphic designer and, on top of all that, a full-time graduate student.

Hop over to YouTube and you can watch "Another Statistic," the gritty public service announcement that Benedetti produced for the Wisconsin AIDS Network. Earlier this year, the 60-second video won a 2009 Student Silver Addy for television work, an award presented by the Madison chapter of the American Advertising Foundation. The piece—which Benedetti conceptualized, directed, edited and scored--was her first venture into filmmaking.

"Another Statistic" was originally shot last fall as a course assignment in LSC 315, Intro to Digital Video, where Professor Patty Loew asks each of her students to create a short PSA for a Madison-area non-profit group. Loew was impressed with Benedetti's final product and thought that the clip was worthy of being entered in the AAF's annual competition.

"I'm not surprised at all that the Madison Advertising Federation honored her with this award. It was well deserved," says Loew, who cited the PSA's monochromatic starkness and haunting music as its stand-out features.

When she's not behind the lens of a camera, you can find Benedetti behind the mic in the new WSUM studio. She's the host of "The 70s Punk Hour," a weekly revival of punk rock bands like The Stooges, X and Radio Birdman.

Being live on the air comes naturally to Benedetti: her grandfather is Big Band Ben Benedetti, a renowned Madison DJ who has more than 55 years of professional radio experience. "He's considered to be a living archive of big band music. He's met all of the big names," she says.

While Benedetti herself is new on the radio scene, she's had no problem easing into the host's seat. She enjoys the challenge of putting together her own show, and is grateful that she has cultivated a loyal audience of fellow punk lovers. What's more is that working at WSUM has helped her feel more like part of the LSC family. "Although I do my show in the new station, I was trained at the old one," she says of the now-defunct WSUM facility on State Street. "There is a lot of history there, and it was cool to be a part of that."

In fact, Benedetti seems so at home in LSC that people may forget that she's only been in the department a scant two years. The Sarasota, FL native attended the University of Florida and interestingly enough, majored in biochemistry, not communications. Towards the end of her undergraduate studies, Benedetti decided that she didn't want to pursue life in the lab and began looking for a graduate program that would better suit her interests. "I wanted to move away from the isolated lifestyle of the hard sciences and do something that was more people-oriented. I think that fits my personality better," she says. Then Dean of the Journalism School at UF, Debbie Treise, steered Benedetti towards the LSC Master's program because of her strong writing skills. "It seemed like the right move, so I went for it," she says.

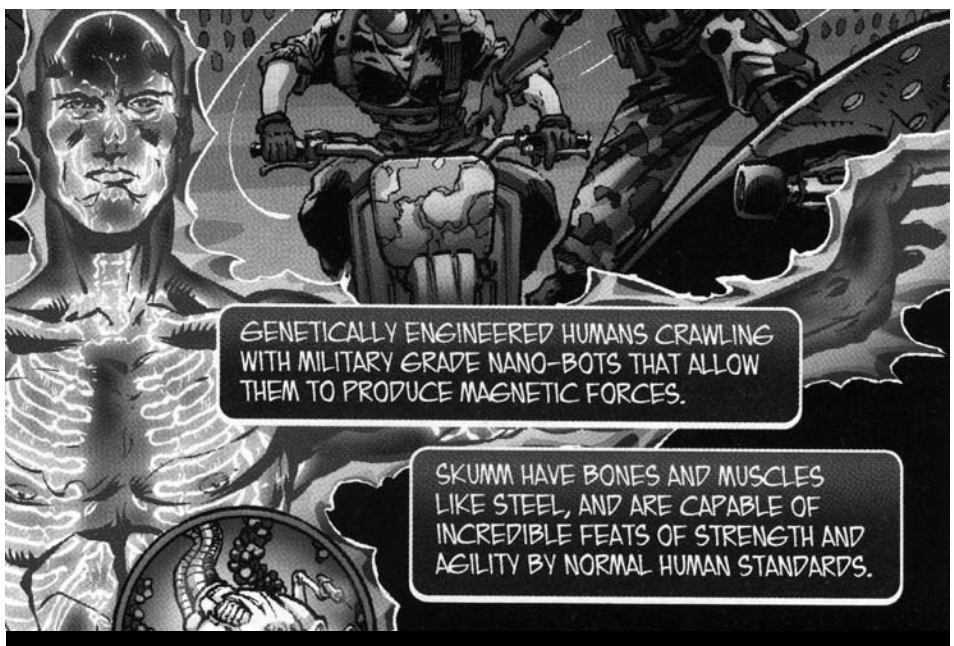



Image from SKUMM, Issue 0 by Digital Webbing.
Bendetti analyzes how nanotechnology is portrayed in comic books.

The interdisciplinary nature of the LSC program still allows Benedetti to flex her scientific muscle, though. For her Master's thesis, she is examining how representations of nanotechnology in media have changed since the mid-1990s. But instead of doing a content analysis of newspapers or television programming, Benedetti is turning to an unlikely source material: comic books.

While she admits that her study is a bit left of center, she feels that the depiction of nanotechnology in comics is something that is ripe for discussion in academia. "When trying to analyze the relationship between media and people's perceptions of nanotechnology, you want to look at content that has a wide, diverse audience. Comic books and other types of pop media do that. Comics aren't just for kids. Everybody reads them," she says.

Benedetti's project is a small part of a $ 1 million NSF-funded grant overseen by Professor Dietram Scheufele, in which he is broadly examining the public opinion dynamics surrounding nanotechnology. The funding has allowed Benedetti to amass quite a collection of comic books, ranging from mainstream series to obscure, independent prints. "What I'm finding is that portrayals of nanotechnology in comics have become increasingly negative over the years. I've been seeing a lot of harmful, apocalyptic imagery in tandem with nano," she says.

Benedetti's research is grabbing people's attention, and she recently traveled to Arizona with Scheufele to present her work at to an NSF review committee. "I think Noel's research is extremely creative. She is doing work that provides some of the answers about how comic books portray emerging technologies and what it may do to readers," says Scheufele.

After Benedetti finishes her thesis this fall, she plans on taking a break from school to pursue a career in graphic design. Designing is yet another project that has found room in her jam-packed schedule, and she regularly lends her talents to the LSC department.


Noel in the new WSUM radio studio with grandpa Big Band Ben Benedetti

> "I wanted to move away from the isolated lifestyle of the hard sciences and do something that was more people-oriented. I think that fits my personality better."

Walk around Hiram Smith and you will probably see a newsletter, button, or some other object on display to which Benedetti has contributed her artistic finesse. She has also gained some experience in web design by creating the website for InvivoSciences, an up-and-coming medical research center (http://invivosciences.com). She would ultimately like to design for companies that will offer her wide exposure but also let her have creative freedom. "I'm definitely into more alternative aesthetics. Hopefully there is a niche market out there for groups who want to create a young, edgy image," she says.

Still, Benedetti doesn't plan to abandon her other interests once she becomes a professional. "I would like keep film and radio as hobbies, and I think I will come back to academia," she says. "It would be awesome if I could keep doing everything."

# public support for boifuels?

by Elizabeth GOERS

Current LSC Masters Student

"What we are doing is creating one of the most thorough understandings, at least on a statewide level, of what the public thinks about, and knows, related to biofuels, both corn-based ethanol and biofuels more globally conceived," said LSC Assistant Professor Bret Shaw.

Bret, together with LSC faculty colleagues Hernando Rojas and Dietram Scheufele, is conducting public opinion research of this gasoline alternative, both within Wisconsin and across the US.

In the first study, Shaw and Rojas ran a survey through the Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project, a joint venture that brought together more than 60 researchers from 25 academic institutions and collected multiple waves of data during 2008. The questions covered a broad range of issues including the perceived effects of biofuels on sustainability, food prices, food supplies, national security and clean air. They found evidence of positive attitudes among Americans in support of further investigation of biofuels.

"These positive perceptions are not enough for biofuels to become viable," Rojas cautioned. "There is an economic component and a public policy component that need to be considered."

Indeed, though Rojas and Shaw saw statistically significant increases in support of biofuels over the two survey waves, there are still roadblocks to gaining public investment.

"The tricky part is that very few people support higher taxes on gasoline to support the research and infrastructure needed for the widespread adoption of alternatives," Rojas said. "We could wait until fossil fuel prices are so high that biofuels can be developed without public investment, but I think this would be environmentally irresponsible. The question then becomes how do we convert these positive attitudes regarding biofuels into action that supports faster deployment of a biofuel infrastructure?"

Shaw is also currently working with Scheufele on a statewide Badger Poll on ethanol and biofuels. The Badger Poll is conducted twice a year by the UW via a telephone survey of 500-600 randomly selected Wisconsin citizens asking them about attitudes towards various topics. The current Badger Poll focuses almost solely on biofuels, and asks Wisconsin citizens about their awareness and support of biofuels. Scheufele is an international expert on how message framing can shape public opinion on emerging technologies.

"We are making the mistake of talking about this as if the public is concerned about the science behind biofuels, when most people are not," Scheufele said. "My guess is that most people's attitudes toward biofuels come down to pocketbook motivations meaning – 'what does this do for me economically?' 'Is this going to drive up food prices so I have less disposable income and will it increase the cost of gasoline?' The biggest selling point for biofuels, in my opinion, will be if scientists can convince the public that biofuels can produce cheap and sustainable gasoline that will help the US to become energy independent."

Despite what some people see as recent "going green" trends, Scheufele believes that arguing in defense of the environment is not enough to convince people to care about biofuels. "Al Gore-type arguments that lecture people about polar bears will not be overly compelling to an American public that traditionally doesn't care about environmental issues," Scheufele said.

Another roadblock in public support for biofuels is the food-versus-fuel frame that has been marketed. Suggesting that scientists and policy-makers are taking away food from citizens and putting it into gas tanks may be an inaccurate description of the science behind ethanol, but the frame nonetheless provides a powerful mental image to many consumers by pitting the search for sustainable energy resources against cost-of-living expenses for US consumers.

"When we talk about misconceptions it is important to understand that even scientifically inaccurate facts can serve as powerful arguments for many consumers," Scheufele said. "Just because a scientist thinks that something isn't a concern doesn't mean that citizens will not take it into account when forming opinions about emerging technologies. And they may do so, knowing that most scientists disagree with them."


Shaw and Scheufele are currently fielding the first round of the Badger Poll surveys, and will report specifics as the survey results come in.

"Ultimately, a compelling argument needs to made as to why biofuels are a viable part of America's energy portfolio because it's not going to be all wind or all gasoline or all solar. It really will be a mix of solutions in our national energy supply," Shaw said.

> "Positive perceptions are not enough for biofuels to become viable."

The LifeSciencesCommunicator, a biannual alumni newsletter of the Department of Life Sciences Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, would like to thank the following:
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