COMING FALL 2010

MRS and NOVA Partner to Create Primetime Public Television Series on Materials Science

Most materials researchers would agree that their field is not a discipline that is particularly well known or well understood by the general public. For example, while attending the Materials Research Society Fall Meeting in Boston one year, I was riding one of the escalators outside the Marriott. Two women, who appeared to be headed toward the stores in the mall, asked me, "What is the Mrs. Society?" Although I was tempted to respond with a glib answer, I did my best to explain the field of materials science in about 30 seconds.

Each of us probably has our own "elevator" speech that attempts to explain our discipline to the average citizen who has little scientific or engineering background. Yet, if you are like me, you find it difficult to convey the breadth, depth, and excitement of the field. It is not that we have not thought about this. In fact, in our vision statement for Strange Matter, the MRS traveling museum exhibition on materials science, we say, "The hidden and active science of materials shapes our physical world from the mundane to the mysterious." Yet that still does not quite explain what materials science is.

When you start to consider the mechanisms for reaching the general public and conveying the excitement and implications of our field, television clearly stands out as one of the most effective media. The amazing stories that are present throughout our field can be conveyed in visual form, and animation can begin to link microstructure, processing, and properties in a visual context.

With that in mind, MRS and NOVA, the flagship PBS science documentary series, have teamed to produce a four-part PBS primetime series on materials science.* Slated to air in the fall of 2010, the television series will present dramatic stories about the materials that are transforming our world. From breakthroughs of the Bronze Age to modern nanoparticles to the only-imagined materials of the future, the series will describe the human and scientific factors that lead to innovation in materials science and what that means to our everyday lives.

The four programs will trace the surprising roots of today's technological materials decades or centuries, sometimes even thousands of years, back into the past. And we will look into the future for the next era of advanced materials, too—from those developed for space elevators to nanorobots, ultralight armor, and green technologies.

With only four hours of airtime to cover a lot of scientific territory, the production team is currently scouring the research literature and canvassing scientists to come up with the most visually exciting and compelling stories in materials science today—stories that will make "good television." As you might imagine, this criterion is a little different than one we might use to define a good materials science story. The MRS Public Outreach Committee has a team of advisors that is providing input to the NOVA producers on the scientific aspects of the episodes as well as providing story ideas and contacts.

Filming will begin this fall, so you may see a camera crew at the 2009 MRS Fall Meeting. Coinciding with the series premiere show next fall, there will be opportunities for MRS members to engage in outreach activities in local communities.

Stay tuned….

AMY J. MOLL
Chair, MRS Public Outreach Committee

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