

A ‘Savvy’ Scientific American

Executive editor Fred Guterl '81 helps the 166-year-old magazine thrive in the digital age.

By Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

FRED GUTERL '81 RECALLS THAT HE WAS SIX or seven years old, growing up in Rockland County, New York, the son of an engineer, when science first lit his imagination.

“It was the 1960s and the moon race was on,” he says. “That stuff was in the headlines all the time, and I was completely taken by it.”

Those headlines, of course, were the big, inky kind that, on major news days especially—such as July 21, 1969, the morning after Neil Armstrong and Edwin (Buzz) Aldrin became the first humans to walk on the moon—soiled your shirtsleeves and blackened your fingertips.

More than 40 years later, at a time when it takes more than newsprint or grainy analog television newscasts to ignite general interest in science, Guterl is helping the nation's oldest, and many say most authoritative, popular science news venue to thrive in the digital age.

Guterl, who studied electrical engineering at Rochester, is a veteran science journalist who served in editorial roles at *Discover*, *IEEE Spectrum* (the magazine of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers), and *Newsweek* before joining *Scientific American* as executive editor in April 2010.

He was hired to help spearhead the magazine's latest redesign. At *Scientific American*, redesigns are part of a process of what editor-in-chief Mariette DiChristina has fittingly described as evolution. “Everything evolves,” she wrote in October 2010, introducing the recalibrated and rejuvenated magazine.

But the struggle for survival in the wild world of media is a bit more daunting than usual. “It's no secret that print journalism isn't growing,” says Guterl. “Any magazine that wants to survive has got to figure out what to do about that. You can decide to hang on to what you have for as long as you can, or try to reinvent yourself, in addition to holding on to what you have.”

What *Scientific American* has had for some time, Guterl stresses, is pretty good: more than 500,000 loyal, highly educated print subscribers. What it has devel-

oped more recently is arguably even better. “We've got close to 3 million unique visitors to our website every month,” he says.

The October 2010 redesign of both the print and online editions changed the look of *Scientific American*, and updated several of its departments. Science journalist Charles Petit praised the redesign on the well-respected blog *Knight Science Journalism Tracker*, noting the magazine's “increased readability, timeliness, and savvy,” and the

“The really exciting thing we're doing is getting all of our editors, including the ones who have worked mainly on print features, to think more broadly about our content across platforms,” says Guterl.

Last January, in a sign of what's to come, *Scientific American* launched its first special edition for the iPad.

It drew content from two previous theme issues—“Origins: The Start of Everything” (September 2009) and “The End: Death,



American Society of Magazine Editors gave it one of its coveted “Ellie” awards—a National Magazine Award for General Excellence—at a celebration last May.

“That is real recognition from our peers that we've raised the bar here in terms of editorial quality,” says Guterl.

Now he and a team of editors are looking ahead toward creating more, and more impressive, digital enhancements for the magazine.

▲ **LIFE IN CYBERSPACE:** Transforming print magazine features into digital events gives them “an alternative life” online, says Guterl, who is helping create digital enhancements at *Scientific American*.

Endings, and Things that Should End” (September 2010)—and combined and transformed it to create a downloadable collection of articles, audio interviews, videos, and interactive graphics called “Origins and Endings.”

Guterl says *Scientific American* will continue to take feature articles and transform them into digital events with three-dimensional, interactive graphics, among other elements.

Because while printed articles can be static, on the web, they live. As Guterl says, they have “an alternative life.” And helping ensure that those alternative lives have richness in content and meaning to readers will be Guterl's job in the days ahead. **R**