



Three Q's

Julian Huppert has mixed local politics and science since graduating from the University of Cambridge in 2000. The biochemist studies knots of DNA known as quadruplexes, and in the 6 May general election in the United Kingdom, he won Cambridge's seat in Parliament, running as a Liberal Democrat. An extended version of this interview is at <http://bit.ly/JulianHuppert>.

Q: Do you plan to give up research?

Being a scientist and a member of Parliament are both full-time jobs. I will have to leave the lab. ... The general perception is that I can probably do more for the research community by being a voice who can speak up for it.

Q: If you had to pick between winning a Nobel Prize or being prime minister, what's your greater ambition?

[laughs] I'm not sure if either of those is likely to happen.

Q: Do you hope to be on the parliamentary science committee?

I've had some conversations about that. On the other hand, I don't want to be pigeonholed as a scientist. I'm also on the National Council of Liberty. That looks at civil liberties issues, justice issues, and my belief is that the evidence-based approach also applies there. For example, there was very nice research on "restorative justice" as an alternative to short-term sentencing, which shows that it's better at reducing future crime, cheaper, and preferred by victims. That evidence-based approach is very important across the board; it's not just unique to scientists. I don't want to be seen as somebody who can just talk about research and research funding.

Jolly Good Fellows

The 19 inaugural Canadian Excellence Research Chairs (CERC) announced this week have two things in common: They're all illustrious scientists. And they're all men. In fact, not a single woman was even nominated.

CERC was created to bring in outside talent by offering \$10 million over 7 years to each chair and the Canadian university that nominated him

(or, in theory, her). First, 41 institutions submitted 135 proposals for research programs; a review panel narrowed the list to 36 proposals from 17 universities. Then universities nominated scientists to fill each slot. All nominated men.

The outcome "indicates to me that our ideas about who can succeed in science and who we want to celebrate remain very gendered, and that it runs very deep," says

Elana Brief, president of the Society for Canadian Women in Science and Technology and a physicist at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada.

An ad hoc panel the government assembled to investigate the result found no wrongdoing but suggested changes for the next round of nominations, 7 years hence. One was to offer separate awards for senior and midcareer nominees. Most women in science haven't been at it long enough to earn seniority status but are excellent midcareer scientists, says Suzanne Fortier (above), who led the panel and is president of the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada. The panel also said nominations should include reports explaining how universities chose their nominees.



Yeah, Right

Israeli computer scientists have devised an algorithm to detect sarcasm in online commentary. The work could help companies better measure consumer opinion and possibly even help policymakers suss out their constituents' true feelings on issues.

Scientists can decipher the tone of online comments by counting words such as "terrific" or "horrible." Sarcasm throws a wrench in the works when sentences that seem to praise actually criticize.

Researchers at Hebrew University of Jerusalem analyzed thousands of book and product reviews on Amazon.com and identified examples of sarcasm and sincerity. They fed those into a computer and created an algorithm, the Semi-supervised Algorithm for Sarcasm Identification (SASI), to tell which is which.

To test its accuracy, computer scientists Oren Tsur and Ari Rappoport used SASI to look for sarcastic sentences in 66,000 Amazon reviews. Human volunteers then reviewed 180 of the sentences SASI identified and classified them as snarky or serious. SASI agreed with the volunteers 77% of the time, far greater than an algorithm would have achieved by chance.

Computer and information scientist Bei Yu of Syracuse University in New York state says the study is interesting, but it remains to be seen if it can be applied to political blogs or other online opinions.

Text Me to the River

Drifting downstream in your canoe, you hear your phone beep. It's a text message. From the river. Rough water ahead! You head for shore.

Far-fetched? No, it's real. About 10,000 water resources across the United States are wired with sensors that feed continuous data about conditions and water quality to the United States Geological Survey (USGS). Now USGS is sharing that information through WaterAlert, a service similar to Google News Alerts. To sign up, go to <http://water.usgs.gov/wateralert> and choose a body of water to track and the parameters that will trigger an alert by text or e-mail. Recreational paddlers aren't the only potential users; the millions of Americans who draw water from wells can get WaterAlerts warning of contamination. Most readings are available hourly, but updates are more frequent during emergencies. USGS sensors spread throughout the United States currently monitor some 1200 wells, 9000 streams and rivers, and 360 lakes, and more are planned.

"We have over 1800 subscriptions within just 3 days of public release," says Brian McCallum, a USGS environmental engineer who helped create WaterAlert. How about adding real-time data to help drivers find parking spots? "Perhaps when we go to hydrogen-fueled cars that have water vapor as an emission," muses McCallum.

