

Radu's Rides: La Vie en... Beige

Summer's change of pace has made our contributing editor **Radu Craiu** ponder, just how beige *is* a statistics professor's life, and how colourful is our future?

Summer is when we are reminded, more than ever, that the world has colours. Sharp, vibrant colours that often accompany things that taste good or make us laugh. This is the time when we disentangle our daily program from chores and focus on what we really like, on the only things that we would do if "necessary" and "salary" were just some words from someone else's diary. Those reading this column are probably summoning a kaleidoscope of summery images that include diving into a blue sea and into a hard problem. The two rarely meet in this *Bulletin*, so we will deal with the latter and leave you to enjoy the former.

Among the biggest joys offered by hard problems is the *eureka* moment when a new angle is glimpsed, derived or simply felt. Pulled or pushed by that moment of inspiration, we follow the thread of exhilarating ideas and proceed to dream big and write expansively. Nothing this important deserves to sit in a drawer or in a cloud, so we must do what it takes to share it with the world. And this is where things start to turn. For one thing, summer is probably over by submission time and the first round of reviews have a diabolical tendency to coincide with the first wave of angry emails from students about that midterm that was way too difficult and super-extra-unfairly marked. If the reviewers are generous, there's the chance to labour for a couple of months on clarifications and simulations... winter arrives, snow must be shovelled, and committees are formed out of thin air like devious genies whose mission is to dash all hopes and good wishes. Too negative, you say? I completely agree, and yet everywhere

I turn I hear grumbles about the downsides of an academic career. I would be a fool not to acknowledge that there are plenty of reasons to be worried about the future of higher education in many—perhaps in most—parts of the world. But the battle for saving this profession and its standards is essential for everyone's future, not just this *Bulletin*'s readers. Painting a professor's life in beige is not going to save the world but rather accelerate its decay. Stupid optimism may not sound attractive, but perhaps it is the only way to move forward in difficult times. And not only for the stupid who practice it, but especially for all the young, smart ones around them. If you, an established researcher, have reasons to be sad and disappointed and pessimistic, imagine how it feels to be starting in this career at a time of extreme uncertainty. The least we can do is to project confidence that the present will bring a colourful future. Let me give you an example.

As summer heat and AI rumours creep in and out of my life like indecisive robbers, I sense a certain pressure to take a firm position with respect to the latter, which, come to think of it, is a funny thing to do in a fast-evolving world. Every time I am contemplating making a jump into the unknown, I start to seriously question whether the world is better served by a mumbling statistician or a fumbling AI-ician. When in Athens at the O'Bayes meeting (<https://obayes25.aueb.gr/>), with a week at my disposal to ponder statistical questions in a city drenched in culture and Mediterranean sun, I lean towards the former. Back on the North American continent, I have conversations with students and most of them seem to push me towards the latter. On the one hand, there is plenty of new, ongoing or unfinished business in the statistical world. On the other, there are

a lot more jobs that require AI/ML training and expertise. I have been told to gain perspective by looking at the big picture, but people who say that automatically assume that the details are still visible when you pan out. My experience is a bit different, as losing track of details can feel like a scary departure from the usual mathematical approach in which even infinitesimal parts play big roles.

Rather than a big picture, we should perhaps contemplate an *earlier* one. We all know that when we are young, we live under the impression that originality is our modus operandi. For the rare few, the sentiment is anchored in true ingenuity, but for the majority it appears because they know very little of what happened before... them. As we advance in age, we learn more about life, statistics, etc., and the sense that everything has been already thought of can become an obstacle in the way of creativity. The AI revolution has the potential to make all of us feel young again, so that's a silver lining to the general beige cloud that permeates many statistics departments.

I take my leave by invoking the eloquence of Joseph Davis, an economist at Stanford's Food Research Institute, who wrote in 1940 for a special issue of *JASA* commemorating the American Statistical Association's centennial, and whose words ring as true today as almost 100 years ago:

"Pausing in our stride, we seek perspective from a long look backward, enlightenment from a review of current trends, and inspiration from a long look ahead. Standing at the mid-point of two centuries, we gird up our collective loins for the tasks ahead—new decades of effective progress and constructive leadership in the art and science to which we have a common devotion."