Columbia Honors Two Engineering and Science Giants

On Wednesday, Nov. 16, the Columbia Engineering School Alumni Association (CESAA) held its annual awards dinner in the Low Rotunda. The evening’s honors went to Rudolf Kalman (SEAS’57), who received the Egleston Medal for Distinguished Engineering Achievement; and to Richard N. Zare, who received the Pupin Medal for Service to the Nation.

CESAA president Ron Mangione hailed Kalman as “the creator of modern control and systems theory, which have become standard tools for engineers and mathematicians alike.” Kalman’s discovery of the ‘Kalman filter’ and of modern algebraic techniques had revolutionized mathematics-based engineering, he said.

Upon receiving the Egleston Medal, CESAA’s highest honor, Kalman said that the timing could not have been more thrilling: “I am back at Columbia on the 50th anniversary of my first arrival here, in the fall of 1955.”

Kalman is a member of the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and a foreign member of the Hungarian, French and Russian Academies of Science. He adds his Egleston Medal to a number of prestigious honors: among them, the IEEE Medal of Honor; the IEEE Centennial Medal, the Kyoto Prize in High Technology, the Steele Prize of the American Mathematical Society and the Bellman Prize of the American Automatic Control Council. Kalman received his Eng.Sc.D. from Columbia in 1957, and a B.S. and M.S. from MIT in electrical engineering.

University president Lee C. Bollinger introduced Zare as “someone who has influenced the research curricula and funding of science education throughout the United States—and who is recognized as a pioneer in the spirit of [Michael J.] Pupin,” the famous physicist, inventor and professor of electro-mechanics who taught at Columbia from 1901 to 1931.

Zare, who is currently a professor of natural science and chair of the Department of Chemistry, Stanford University, was a member of Columbia’s chemistry faculty from 1969 to 1977, where he began a program using laser-induced fluorescence to look at ultra-trace chemicals in complex mixtures.

New Media Leaders Debate the Future of News

A recent panel discussion held at Columbia, five new media leaders explained how their news staffs have sprinted from the technology dark ages to the forefront of electronic journalism, arguing that others must follow suit or be relegated to the history books.

The discussion brought together Len Apcar, NYTimes.com editor; Jeff Gralnick, NBC special consultant and former VP of ABCNews.com; Andrea Panceria, editor of The Providence (R.I.) Journal’s ProJo.com; Craig Newmark, founder and chief customer service representative of Craigslist; and James Taranto, editor and columnist for Wall Street Journal Online editorial page OpinionJournal.com.

The event was the inaugural session of a new joint initiative between Columbia’s Graduate School of Journalism and the Hearst Foundation to examine the latest media trends, with an emphasis on new media and online journalism.

As the panelists spoke and fielded questions—many of them from mobile phones and e-mail—moderator Sree Sreenivasan, Columbia Journalism School’s dean of students, pulled up relevant Web sites on a screen behind the speakers.

At one point, Panceria turned questions back on the audience, asking how many people read newspapers in print form. Almost every hand went up. “That’s a skewed response,” she laughed. “At most colleges I go to, almost no one is reading a print newspaper.”

Although panelists’ responses took a potentially explosive turn when Taranto lit into the media’s surgical strike information source, “he said. But is that information legitimate?”

Newmark said that with so many facts available, fact checking becomes even more crucial. Craigslist, like other online publishers, has had to develop detailed strategies to deal with fake information that spreads like wildfire across online forums.

Panceria said that the Internet has allowed for ways, unimaginable up to now, of getting information to readers’ interests. By setting up a chat on ProJo.com for girls’ high school tennis players, for example, she said the paper was able to give readers interaction and information while also gaining insight into its audience by reading over the chatroom exchanges.

Old habits die hard, though. “I admit to being a dinosaur,” Gralnick began. When Princess Diana died in September 1997, 6 million page views in a month at ABCNews.com opened Gralnick’s eyes to the readership possibilities in presented. Now Gralnick has gone beyond the printed page, proclaiming that newspapers must get out and find their audiences “on whatever devices they are using.”

Taranto pointed out that this new accessibility was changing political history. He suggested that Trent Lott would still be Majority Leader. Dan Rather might still be reporting, and Harriet Miers would be headed for the Supreme Court if online dissemination hadn’t made their shortcomings such instant household information.

“My original story [on the lack of support for Miers] would never have been as prominent in print,” Taranto said. “If a public person does something foolish, they’ll get jumped on very quickly.”