

# Materials for Magnetic Data Storage: The Ongoing Quest for Superior Magnetic Materials

Hans Coufal, Lisa Dhar, and C. Denis Mee,  
Guest Editors

## Abstract

From its inception until today, and for the foreseeable future, magnetic data storage on disks and tape has provided constantly increased storage density. This has required not only constant innovation, but also major breakthroughs in magnetic materials, both for the media and the read head. Today's disk and tape drives take advantage of novel nanoengineered composite magnetic materials and quantum mechanical processes. In this issue of *MRS Bulletin*, we present a number of review articles by some of the leaders in this rapidly moving field that highlight the key materials science accomplishments that have enabled the tremendous progress in hard disk drive and magnetic tape technologies. Individual articles describe the materials involved in state-of-the-art magnetic recording, advanced media for perpendicular magnetic recording, the materials challenges of achieving high performance in flexible media such as magnetic tape, the materials issues of read heads, and future avenues for magnetic storage beyond magnetic recording, such as nanowires and spintronics.

**Keywords:** *magnetic, magnetoresistance, memory, nanoscale, spintronic.*

Half a century of progress in magnetic data storage has changed the world. Almost 50 years ago, on September 13, 1956, IBM announced the 305 RAMAC (random access method of accounting and control) computer system with the IBM 350, the world's first disk drive. This novel way to store and retrieve data with a rotating disk enabled rapid "random" access to the data. The high cost of one recording and read head and the associated racks of electronics was amortized over 50 24-in. disks with a total of ~5 Mbyte of storage capacity, resulting in an acceptable cost per bit.

As shown in Figure 1, the storage density of hard disk drives (HDDs) has since then increased by eight orders of magnitude from these humble beginnings, first at a compounded growth rate of 25% per year, then 60%, followed by several years of 100%, to finally slow down a little bit in the last couple of years. At the same time, the cost has been declining exponentially (see Figure 2); today, storing data on a hard disk is substantially cheaper than storing the same information on paper.

Disk drive design, while basically unchanged from its inception, required

breakthroughs in magnetic materials to enable the low-cost, large-capacity disk drives that have moved computers from the "glass houses" of the early days, which proudly showcased a company's most prized possession behind a wall of windows, to portable applications such as laptops or iPods. Some of the drastic changes in the areal density curve of Figure 1 are due to breakthroughs in materials science that allowed the introduction of new technologies such as the thin-film head, the magnetoresistance head, and, finally, giant magnetoresistance and magnetic tunnel junction heads and the corresponding magnetic recording media. The development of nanoengineered composite magnetic multilayers based on spintronics and other quantum mechanical processes enabled the most recent density advances.

Magnetic tape drives, which were developed well before the magnetic HDD, have also improved in storage density over a long period, but at a slower rate than HDDs. Progress in the areal density of HDDs has been slow to trickle down to removable flexible media, which has lagged the areal density of hard disks by typically 2–3 orders of magnitude. Nevertheless, due to the removability feature of the media and the well-understood long-term behavior of magnetic tape, it is still the archival storage material of choice for the information technology industry and has for many years dominated information storage in the consumer market, first in the form of audio cassettes and later as the ubiquitous VHS cartridge for video recording. More recently, optical storage (CDs and DVDs) and flash memory have come to dominate the consumer market.

In this issue, we have collected reviews of the state of the art in materials for magnetic recording devices, plus some of the developments that are in progress, and we address the perennial question of why magnetic tape has been lagging disk drives in areal density and what it would take to change that fact.

The fundamentals of magnetic recording and the arguments summarized in this introduction, scaling over the last 50 years in particular, are discussed in more detail by McFadyen et al. This article includes a thorough discussion of conventional longitudinal recording and advances in spin-exchange coupled media and giant magnetoresistance read heads.

Richter and Harkness take us to the next step—magnetic recording media with densities above 100 Gbit/square inch. At these densities, HDD technology may transition from longitudinal to perpendicular media; that is, the magnetiza-

tion would no longer be parallel to the surface of the media but perpendicular to it instead. The principles and the advantages of patterned media are explained,

and the material science implications and challenges are discussed.

Parkin, who has made major contributions to the progress in magnetic record-

ing over the years, focuses on the use of the magnetic tunnel effect for read heads in his article. Given the decreasing size of the magnetic bits and a minimum safe distance between the read head and the rapidly spinning magnetic media, the sensitivity of the magnetic sensor to the fields that are present in a disk drive has to increase ever more. The underlying physics and preliminary results of this novel detection scheme are discussed.

Allenspach and Jubert, and Wolf et al., take us further into the future of magnetic storage. Magnetic domains in nanowires and more sophisticated applications of spintronics, along with giant magnetoresistance read heads and antiferromagnetically coupled media discussed in the other articles, may provide the breakthroughs that will allow future improvements in areal density. Looking back to the beginnings of magnetic recording, the rotating disk allowed "random" access to the stored data and kept the cost per bit reasonably low. Now, nanoelectronics—and spintronics in particular—may enable data storage in an all-solid-state device at a competitive cost and provide truly random access at the speeds of modern computers. Products employing nanoelectronics and spintronics are now in development.

In addition, with cheap and reliable archival storage still being one key priority for the operators of data centers as well as film and broadcast studios, it is only natural to ask the question, how will these breakthroughs in magnetic recording be reflected in future magnetic tape systems? Dee analyzes the similarities and the differences between magnetic storage on a rigid, spinning disk and on flexible tape, and points out the hurdles that have to be overcome to enable a convergence of the two recording technologies.

In this issue of the *MRS Bulletin*, we have sought to cover areas in materials science research and engineering that span the field of current and future magnetic data storage. From state-of-the-art disk drives, with advanced read heads and media, we cover composite media and read heads that take full advantage of the relevant quantum mechanical processes, such as spin exchange and tunneling. We hope that the articles on magnetic recording in this issue and on optical media in the April 2006 issue<sup>1</sup> will draw attention to the exciting materials science challenges involved in advancing data storage.

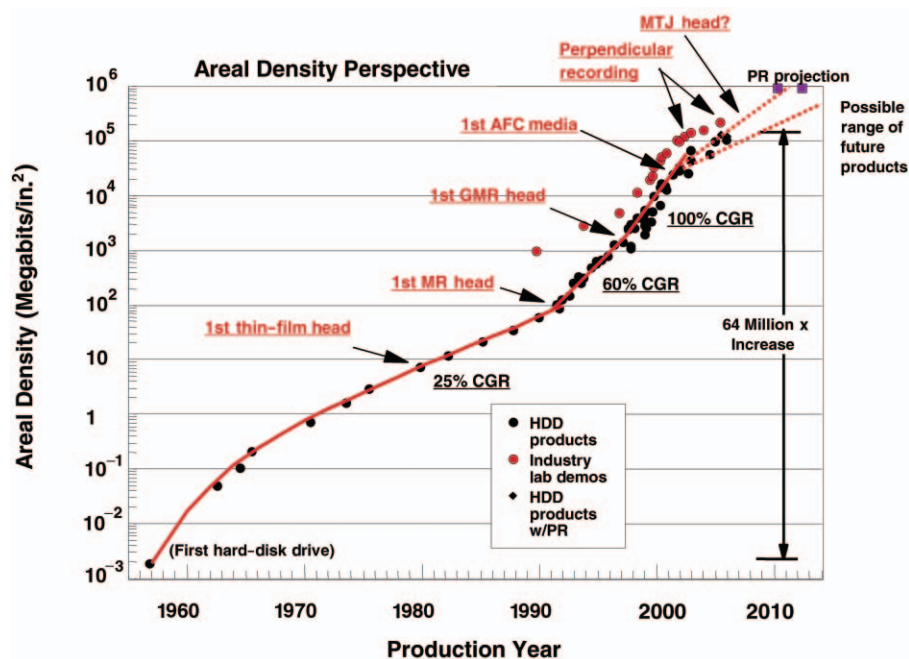


Figure 1. Areal density of magnetic hard disk drives as a function of calendar year, from the first disk drive to today's products. The compounded growth rate (CGR) for some of the periods are indicated, as well as the technical breakthroughs that allowed changes in the slope. MR stands for the introduction of the magnetoresistance head, GMR the introduction of the giant magnetoresistance head, AFC the introduction of antiferromagnetically coupled media, and PR the introduction of perpendicular recording into the manufacturing of hard disk drives (HDDs).

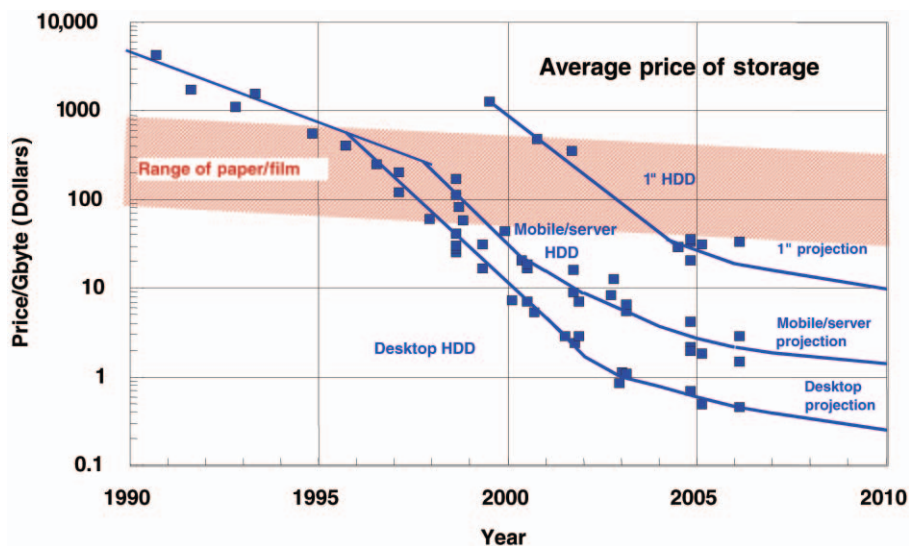


Figure 2. Price per gigabyte of data stored on a hard disk drive as a function of calendar year, with projections to the year 2010.

## References

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**Hans Coufal**, guest editor for this issue of *MRS Bulletin*, is manager of device and systems innovation in the IBM Research Center. He is currently on assignment to the Semiconductor Research Corp. as the founding director of the Nanoelectronics Research Corp. Coufal earned his applied physics degrees from the Technische Hochschule in Munich, Germany.

After serving as a junior faculty member at the same university and at the Freie Universität in Berlin, he joined the staff at the IBM San Jose Research Laboratory, the precursor to the Almaden Research Center, in 1981. He has held several management positions in addition to his own scientific work on thermal and acoustic transients and holographic data storage. He has more than 150 scientific publications, is the editor of eight books, and holds 14 patents. He is a fellow of the Optical Society of America, the American Physical Society of America, and the International Union of Pure and Applied Physics. He is also the recipient of the Bundesverdienstkreuz, the German counterpart of the Order of Merit.

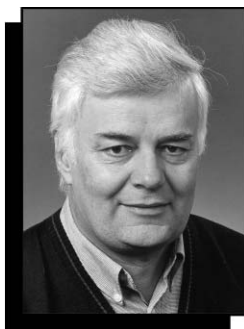
Coufal can be reached at IBM Almaden Research Center, KLPA/D2, IBM Research Division, 650 Harry Road, San Jose, CA 95120-6099, USA; tel. 408-927-2441 and e-mail coufal@almaden.ibm.com.

**Lisa Dhar**, guest editor for this issue of *MRS Bulletin*, is the vice president of media development and one of the

founders of InPhase Technologies (Longmont, Colo.). Before founding InPhase, she was a member of the Bell Labs core team at Lucent Technologies responsible for developing the technology in holographic storage upon which InPhase is based. She holds a PhD degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a BS degree from the University of Chicago, both in chemistry. She has authored numerous technical articles in the areas of holographic data storage, optical microscopy, and pulsed lasers, and she is the inventor on more than 15 patents and patent applications.

Dhar can be reached at InPhase Technologies, 2000 Pike Road, Longmont, CO 80501, USA; tel. 217-369-7409 and e-mail lisadhar@inphasetech.com.

**C. Denis Mee**, guest editor for this issue of *MRS Bulletin*, is a retired IBM Fellow who has worked in the field of information storage for the past 50 years. In 1956, he developed magnetic tape media for use in digital storage applications. Then, in 1957, he joined CBS Laboratories, where he developed a magnetic recording system for a new high-density audio recorder. In 1962, he started a 30-year career at IBM, where he managed numerous technology projects for computer storage and memory products before rounding out his career as a co-founder of the National Storage Industry Consortium in 1991. Mee has authored and edited several books on magnetic recording; he



**Hans Coufal**

is a member of the National Academy of Engineering and an IEEE Fellow.

Mee can be reached at 14500 Fruitvale Ave. #6114, Saratoga, CA 95070, USA; tel. 408-741-7672 and e-mail cdenis@aol.com.

**Rolf Allenspach** is manager of the Physics of Nanoscale Systems group at the IBM Research Laboratory in Rüschlikon, Switzerland. He received his PhD degree in 1986 from ETH Zurich for his work in the field of spin-polarized electron spectroscopy. He then joined IBM as a research staff member, investigating ultrathin magnetic films. His research on nanomagnets focuses on high-resolution imaging of magnetic patterns. Allenspach also lectures at ETH on topics in condensed-matter physics since completing his habilitation in 1994.

Allenspach can be reached at IBM Research, Zurich Research Laboratory, Säumerstrasse 4, CH-8803 Rüschlikon, Switzerland; tel. 41-44-724-8267, fax 41-44-724-8956, and e-mail ral@zurich.ibm.com.

**Matthew J. Carey** has been working with materials for magnetic recording for 20 years.



**Lisa Dhar**

After graduating from University of California, San Diego, he worked at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory before joining IBM in San Jose. He is now a research staff member with the Hitachi San Jose Research Center, working primarily on magnetic recording read sensor materials. He has 65 publications and is an inventor on 28 patents and applications, including antiferromagnetically coupled media.

Carey can be reached at Hitachi Global Storage Technologies, K68A/C3, 650 Harry Road, San Jose, CA 95120, USA; tel. 408-323-7218, fax 408-323-7010, and e-mail Matthew.Carey@HitachiGST.com.

**Almadena Chtchelkanova** is currently a program director at the Directorate for Computer and Information Science and Engineering at the National Science Foundation. She is on a leave of absence from Strategic Analysis Inc. (SAI), where, as a senior scientist in the Technology and Analysis Division, she supported numerous programs for clients at the U.S. Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). She holds an MA degree from the Department of



**C. Denis Mee**

Computer Sciences at the University of Texas at Austin (1996) and a PhD degree in physics from Moscow State University in Russia (1988). Before joining SAI, Chtchelkanova spent four years at the Laboratory for Computational Physics and Fluid Dynamics at the Naval Research Laboratory. She has considerable experience in the areas of quantum computing, spintronics, scientific software analysis and design, signal and image processing algorithms, visualization, computational fluid dynamics, optics, and spectroscopy.

Chtchelkanova is a member of the American Physical Society. She has over 30 publications, including a chapter on spintronics for the *Handbook on Nanoscience* (CRC Press, 2003) and the book *Magnetic Interactions and Spin Transport* (Kluwer, 2002), which she edited with Stuart A. Wolf.

Chtchelkanova can be reached at the National Science Foundation, 4201 Wilson Blvd., Ste. 1115, Arlington, VA 22230, USA; tel. 703-292-8910, fax 703-292-9059, and e-mail aachtchel@nsf.gov.

**Richard H. Dee** has been a Sun Fellow since the acquisition of





**Rolf Allenspach**

StorageTek by Sun Microsystems in 2005, where he was previously a Senior StorageTek Fellow. He earned BA, MSc, and PhD degrees in physics from the University of Lancaster in 1975. His PhD degree was in the area of solid-state physics, and he went on to work as a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, working on condensed-matter electric and magnetic phenomena at very low temperatures. In 1979, he became an adjunct assistant professor at UCLA, working in the field of low-temperature condensed-matter physics, in particular, transport and magnetic properties of materials and superconductivity. Subsequently, he worked for several years on superconducting SQUID-based magnetic detection instruments.

His career in magnetic recording spans 23 years at Storage Technology Corp., where he worked on the design and development of thin-film multi-element magnetic recording heads for high-density tape applications and associated magnetic recording physics. His contribution to high-density magnetic tape systems at StorageTek



**Matthew J. Carey**

led to his appointment to the position of StorageTek Fellow.

Dee is a member of the American Physical Society and the IEEE Magnetics Society. He has been a member of the editorial board of *IEEE Transactions on Magnetics* and is currently chapters and membership chair of the Magnetic Society. He holds 20 U.S. patents with 11 pending, and has published approximately 50 technical papers.

Dee can be reached at Sun Microsystems, 1 StorageTek Drive, Louisville, CO 80028-4274, USA; tel. 303-673-3976, fax 303-673-8406, and e-mail richard.dee@sun.com.

**Eric E. Fullerton** is a research staff member and manager of the Fundamentals of Nanostructured Materials Group at the San Jose Research Center of Hitachi Global Storage Technologies. He received his BS degree from Harvey Mudd College in 1984 and his PhD degree in physics from the University of California, San Diego, in 1991. He then worked at Argonne National Laboratory, specializing in the physics of coupled magnetic films. In 1997, he joined the IBM Almaden Research Center, where he



**Almadena Chtchelkanova**

worked until 2003. His current research focuses on the synthesis and characterization of magnetic nanostructures, both as a probe of magnetic materials in reduced dimensions and for the development of novel magnetic storage technologies.

Fullerton can be reached at Hitachi Global Storage Technologies, K64A/E3, 650 Harry Road, San Jose, CA 95120, USA; tel. 408-323-7235, fax 408-323-7010, and e-mail Eric.Fullerton@HitachiGST.com.

**Sam D. Harkness IV** is manager of the advanced technology effort at Seagate Recording Media Operations in Fremont, Calif. He earned BS, MS, and PhD degrees in materials science and engineering from the University of Florida in 1988, 1992, and 1995, respectively. His research interests include the investigation of structure-property relationships governing the advancement of critical scaling parameters for enhanced recording densification, such as the phenomenological effects on magneto-crystalline anisotropy and intergranular exchange fields, as well as equipment design considerations to effect microscopic alterations

in the thin-film magnetic structure. He has co-authored more than 25 refereed publications and holds 17 U.S. patents.

Harkness can be reached at Seagate Recording Media Operations, Thin-Film Technology, 47010 Kato Road, Fremont, CA 94538, USA; tel. 510-624-3674, fax 510-353-4942, and e-mail samuel.d.harkness@seagate.com.

**Pierre-Olivier Jubert** is a research staff member at the IBM Almaden Research Center in San Jose, Calif. He received his PhD degree from the University of Grenoble in 2001 in the field of epitaxial growth and magnetism of nanoparticles. He then joined the IBM Zurich Research Laboratory as a postdoctoral fellow, working on magnetism in nanoscale systems and focusing particularly on magnetic domain walls. Jubert joined the Advanced Storage Concepts Group at IBM Almaden in 2005, focusing on magnetic tape recording. Jubert can be reached at IBM Almaden Research Center, 650 Harry Road, San Jose, CA 95120, USA; tel. 408-927-2057, fax 408-927-3310, and e-mail pjubert@us.ibm.com.

**Ian R. McFadyen** received his both his BS and PhD degrees in physics from Glasgow University. He joined IBM Research in San Jose in 1986 and spent 12 years there working on many aspects of magnetic recording and hard disk drives before moving to head development in 1998. He then joined Hitachi in 2003, working in the recording head development

area and in 2005 joined Hitachi's San Jose Research Center, where he currently manages the Recording Heads and Nanotechnology Department.

McFadyen can be reached at Hitachi Global Storage Technologies, K66A/C3, 650 Harry Road, San Jose, CA 95120, USA; tel. 408-323-7238, fax 408-323-7011, and e-mail Ian.McFadyen@hitachigst.com.

**Stuart Parkin** is an IBM Fellow and manager of the magneto-electronics group at the IBM Almaden Research Center in San Jose, Calif., and a consulting professor in the Department of Applied Physics at Stanford University. He is also director of the IBM-Stanford Spintronic Science and Applications Center, which was formed in 2004. He received his BA degree in 1977 at Trinity College in Cambridge, England, and was named a research fellow there in 1979. He then earned his PhD degree in 1980 at the Cavendish Laboratory, also in Cambridge. He went on to join IBM Research in San Jose in 1982 as a postdoctoral fellow, becoming a permanent member of the staff the following year. In 1999, he was named an IBM Fellow.

Parkin's research interests have included organic superconductors, high-temperature superconductors, and, most recently, magnetic thin-film structures and spintronic materials and devices for advanced sensor, memory, and logic applications. He is a fellow of the Royal Society, the American Physical Society, the



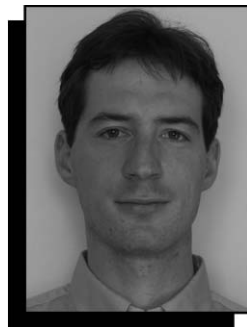
**Richard H. Dee**



**Eric E. Fullerton**



**Sam D. Harkness IV**



**Pierre-Olivier Jubert**

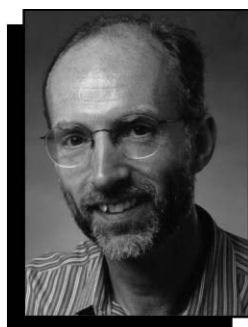


**Ian R. McFadyen**

Institute of Physics (London), the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Parkin is the recipient of numerous honors, including a Humboldt Research Award (2004), the American Institute of Physics Prize for Industrial Applications of Physics (1999–2000), the European Physical Society's Hewlett-Packard Europhysics Prize (1997), the APS International New Materials Prize (1994), and the MRS Outstanding Young Investigator Award (1991). In 2001, he was named *R&D Magazine's* first Innovator of the Year. Parkin has authored more than 330 published papers and has over 50 issued U.S. patents.

Parkin can be reached at IBM Almaden Research Center, 650 Harry Road, San Jose, CA 95120-6099, USA; tel. 408-927-2390 and e-mail parkin@almaden.ibm.com.

**Hans Jürgen Richter** is a technologist at Seagate Technology, where he has led the Recording Physics Group since 1995. He received his undergraduate degree in electrical engineering and his PhD degree in 1989 from the Rheinisch-Westfälisch-



**Stuart Parkin**

Technische Hochschule Aachen in Germany. From 1989 to 1995, he worked at BASF on magnetic, magneto-optical, and optical data storage.

Richter has been active on the editorial board of *IEEE Transactions on Magnetics* since 1996, led the technical committee of the IEEE Magnetics Society from 1999 to 2004, and in 2005 was a consulting professor at Stanford University. He has over 75 publications and holds 19 patents with another 14 pending.

Richter can be reached at Seagate Recording Media, 47010 Kato Road, Fremont, CA 94538, USA; tel. 510-353-4988, fax 510-353-4942, and e-mail hans.j.richter@seagate.com.

**Daryl Treger** is a program manager for Strategic Analysis Inc., providing technical and administrative assis-



**Hans Jürgen Richter**

tance to the U.S. Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) through SETA (scientific, engineering, and technical assistance) support. He received his BS degree in chemical engineering from the University of Buffalo in 1979. He has worked extensively on DARPA programs, including spintronics; spins in semiconductors (SPINS); quantum information science and technology (QulST); and molecular observation, spectroscopy, and imaging using cantilevers (MOSAIC).

Treger can be reached at Strategic Analysis Inc., 3601 Wilson Blvd., Ste. 500, Arlington, VA 22201, USA; tel. 571-236-9486 and e-mail treged@sainc.com.

**Stuart A. Wolf** is a professor of physics and materials science and engineering at the University of Virginia in



**Daryl Treger**

Charlottesville. He recently completed ten years working in the Defense Sciences Office at the U.S. Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) in Arlington, Va. He received his AB degree from Columbia College in 1964 and his MS and PhD degrees from Rutgers University in 1966 and 1969, respectively. He is also a former senior scientist at the Naval Research Laboratory (NRL). At DARPA, he conceived and initiated several projects on functional materials aimed at pushing the frontiers of materials science for electronics, including spintronics; spins in semiconductors (SPINS); quantum information science and technology (QulST); and molecular observation, spectroscopy, and imaging using cantilevers (MOSAIC). He is credited with coining the term "spintronics" in



**Stuart A. Wolf**

1996. Additionally, he was a research associate at Case Western Reserve University from 1970 to 1973 and a visiting scholar at the University of California at Los Angeles from 1981 to 1982.

Wolf has authored or co-authored two books and more than 300 articles and has edited numerous conference proceedings. In addition to his appointment as an APS Fellow, he was a divisional counselor for the APS Condensed Matter Division from 1990 to 1991 and for the Forum on Industrial and Applied Physics from 2000 to 2004.

Wolf can be reached at the University of Virginia, Dept. of Materials Science and Engineering, 116 Engineers Way, Charlottesville, VA 22904, USA; tel. 434-243-2402 and e-mail saw6b@virginia.edu. □