

## Matter of Opinion

# Young martlets: Exploring the world of academia and beyond

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**The Martlets Society ([www.martlets-society.com](http://www.martlets-society.com)) is an independent non-profit organization found and run by young scholars. It aims to build a free and equal community for young scholars to build connections and have interdisciplinary exchanges. It currently holds talks and events with diverse topics to show young scholars the world of academia and beyond. It is also planning more events for the equality in education and academia.**

In the fall of 2019, I witnessed first-hand the frustration of my labmates Ahmed Dalaq and Najmul Abid when trying to get an interview from dozens of post-doc applications they submitted. It was a shock to me that even extremely talented young researchers like them were struggling to get a position anywhere. As a result, two questions lingered in my mind for a long time: should I continue to pursue an academic career given such a competitive market? Is there anything I can do to help underrepresented young academics increase the visibility of their profile and get the job opportunities they deserve? These questions led to the founding of The Martlets Society ([www.martlets-society.com](http://www.martlets-society.com)).

If you shared the same childhood passion as me for the manga One Piece, you will perhaps remember the crew of young pirates pursuing their dreams of adventurous exploration and sailing from one island to another. In some ways, we are like the young pirates sailing in the ocean of academia, venturing among archipelagos of knowledge (Figure 1). In an ideal world, we would conquer an “island” as our own, build a kingdom consisting of people (i.e.,

talented scientists) and towers (i.e., lab infrastructure), have occasional celebrations of success (i.e., impactful publications), and eventually eye for the highest throne (i.e., Nobel Prize). In time, we would also expand our realm to neighboring continents (i.e., adjacent fields) and establish a mega empire that future generations of pirates would read about in awe from history books.

In reality, us little “pirates” are barely finding our feet in our little rocking boats. To start, there aren’t that many “islands” that could accommodate a new explorer: less than 0.5% of PhDs can eventually get a faculty position.<sup>1</sup> The situation is even more dire for those starting out in a niche field, as the journey to high-impact “islands,” where funding and faculty positions are more ample, is long and winding. Most researchers are also solo pirates, without a compass or the North Star. For those who decided to retire from the “pirate life” and leave academia, there are even more challenges ahead, as there is little information and few examples of success. In short, we are pirates with big dreams but trapped in our little boats.

As one of those pirates who wanted to make things better, I thought: why don’t I start building bridges between islands and continents, with clear road signs, so that early stage researchers can easily navigate during their journeys and meet new companions along the way? These bridges can be knowledge sharing, personal stories, skills training, and 1-on-1 mentorship. Clearly, this is a grand project, and I went on to engage a group of passionate scholars (Figure 1) to help me set up and expand the reach of the Martlets Society. These scholars include current PhD students, post-docs, and professors, as well as those who left academic and excelled in other fields such as tech, consulting, finance, startups, and secondary school teaching.

The Martlets Society builds bridges that help young scholars in different ways.<sup>2–4</sup> Firstly, through weekly research talks (TMS talk) and monthly newsletters, we create transparent communication

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and interdisciplinary collaboration within academia and share information about opportunities such as faculty positions. We also run skills workshops (e.g., figure design) aimed at bridging the gap between real needs and what universities provide. We also hold occasional celebrations for the success of our members who published their work or landed dream positions. On the other hand, through our “world

A year into its inception, the Martlets Society has reached more than 2,000 scholars, hosted more than 30 talks covering topics such as interstellar travel, virus detection, personalized healthcare, management consulting, tech transfer, and startups, and made connections between our members with successful scholars such as Dr. Hyunwoo Yuk, Dr. Joe Wong, Dr. Phil De Luna, and Prof. Jun Chen, just to name a few (Figure 2). We now have a



Figure 2. Speakers of TMS Talk, WBA Talk and TMS Workshop, with color indicating their talk topics

stable audience with average 80 attendees per talk, over 1,300 followers of Twitter and Wechat accounts combined, and high-frequency offline engagement between members via our open forum. Throughout the past year, the Martlets Society has also suffered many lows, such as poor attendance in the beginning, controversy over some talks, and a memorable “Zoom bombing” by online trolls. However, none of this deterred us from continuing, and now a year later, we have a bigger committee team (Figure 1), more professional process management, more secure platforms, and more high-profile academics vouching for us (e.g., Prof. Andrew Higgins and Prof. Teng Li). Our committee meets bi-weekly and problem solve key topics to further increase our reach and improve our diversity and inclusion while ensuring we are al-

ways closely aligned with the initial vision of helping scholars navigate their academic and non-academic aspirations in a non-profit manner. As an example to highlight our vision, our latest WBA event “Teach for Needs” hosts Shangjun Zhang and Jake Pollock, previously PhD students at Harvard and Cambridge University, who are teaching in secondary schools and changing the lives of young kids every day. We’re hoping that role models like these would inspire our members in their life goals.

Finally, if you ask me what the name “Martlets” means: a martlet is a mythical bird without feet which never roosts and is continuously on the wing. It represents our wish that all young scholars will never cease pursuing knowledge and meaning.

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