Media Fellow Report 2008

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"Bloody academics!" – a common exclamation in the Times Higher Education (THE) office – "do they want their work to be publicised or not?". Misunderstandings abound in the chasm that sometimes exists between journalists and scientists and, being keenly interested in the workings of the media, I was eager to begin my Fellowship to get a clear view of the world from the other side.

On arriving at the THE office in London, I was introduced to the few members of the news team who were not on summer holiday: "This is Matt. He's an atom smasher." I was then immediately given my first task. I had to summarize a 100 page Ofcom report in 200 words. The studious pedant in me wanted to read the whole thing, but I soon realized that journalists work to tight deadlines so I skim-read the relevant pages and immediately turned 200 words in to my editor. "Good, we can use this. Here's another assignment," he said. In my first day I wrote three stories. One was published with my byline; one was dramatically cut by the editor; and the other got "spiked".

This highlighted the first obvious difference between journalism and research: the speed at which things move. In particle physics it can take a decade to design and build a single particle accelerator. At THE it's not unusual to turn in four or five stories a day.

I spent three weeks with THE and my main responsibility was to write the weekly Research Intelligence article. These tell academics about a new funding stream or training opportunity that has become available. Ironically, my first piece was on "Media Training for Scientists".

Once I got over the pace of life in the print media, I found that it was quite easy to get carried away with the power of the expression: "Hi, this is Matt Rooney from Times Higher Education". Chief executives and government ministers would suddenly be scrambling to take my call. In this situation it was difficult to separate the loyalties I felt towards each profession. As a scientist, I wanted to represent my profession in the best possible light. As a journalist, I wanted dirt!

But regularly talking to research council executives and writing these articles was an excellent way of learning the mechanics of how the councils work, and I really think this will be an asset to me as my career progresses. I even attended an exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts and got to schmooze with the science minister and other bigwigs.

My final task for THE was to write a first person piece on a topic linked to my area of expertise. My Fellowship coincided with the run-up to the big "switch on" of the Large Hadron Collider at CERN, so I pitched an article to my editor. I wanted to explain why it may take years to get results from the experiment, as many people have been hyped up by the media to expect instant revelations – or to be sucked into a black hole. To my surprise, the editor liked the idea. Then I suddenly became terrified. I was writing a story about the most important physics experiment for a generation. If I got my facts wrong, I would incur the wrath of thousands of angry physicists!

I was on shaky ground. Although I design components for particle accelerators, I only have a passing knowledge of the actual sub-atomic phenomena that particle physicists study. Luckily, working at the Rutherford Appleton Lab, I have many eminent physicists at my disposal and with their help I was able to turn in an article that was 100% factually correct (almost).

Perhaps a mistake I made at the beginning of my Fellowship was to read Flat Earth News, by Nick Davies, a book that "exposes falsehood, distortion and propaganda in the global media". This may have given my view of the journalism profession a slightly cynical tinge.

However, some of the accusations leveled at journalists in the book turned out to be true. For example, I witnessed first-hand how science journalists from different publications would sometimes get together after a press conference and agree on an angle to take. Apparently, this shields them from a scolding from the editor for missing some crucial piece of information. But it also gives the media a "pack mentality" and means that sometimes they get it collectively and spectacularly wrong.

Despite some systemic problems with the profession as a whole, the journalists I worked with turned out to be professional and (generally) very ethical in their reporting. The newsroom, despite being a bit hectic at times, was not the angry and combative arena some people had been warning me about. But THE is now a standalone weekly magazine with an intellectual flavour, a resource for policy makers. I was told that the "arrogant so-and-sos" reside on the news desks of the daily papers.

Unquestionably one of the best parts of the BA Media Fellowship was getting to know the other Fellows. The Fellowship began with a briefing day, which gave us all a chance to meet up initially. We came together again for the BA Festival of Science in Liverpool, which marked the end of my placement. All of them were intelligent communicative people in really interesting areas of science. The 2008 cohort included: an evolutionary biologist who collects and studies fruit flies; an environmental scientist who uses her knowledge of soil to help the police catch criminals; a neuropsychologist who studies abnormal cases of amnesia; and me, a humble atom smasher.

At the BA Festival of Science, when the producer of BBC Horizon was asked if scientists ever pitch ideas for programs to him, he replied: "never". I was shocked by this because I know there are so many good stories to tell. In the future I aim to bring them out. The main lesson I've learned from this experience is that – IF they understand each other's motivations – the relationship between journalists and scientists CAN certainly be mutually beneficial, and it's vitally important to get more scientists to take a proactive approach in promoting both their own research and science in general.

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Appendix

Articles written for Times Higher Education

24th July 2008
Ex chief scientist treated unfairly in documentary, Ofcom rules
http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=402942

31st July 2008
Fellowship scheme offers scientists the freedom to shine
http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=403019

7th August 2008
Let students enjoy the power of print
http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=403119

7th August 2008
Research Intelligence - Learn to press for success
http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=403054

14th August 2008
Clocking on
http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=403172

14th August 2008
Research Intelligence - Think big to win Europe's pot of gold
http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=403170

28th August 2008
Research Intelligence - £55 million for knowledge transfer
http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=403283

4th September 2008
Things that go bump in the night (LHC article)
http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=403385

18th September 2008
Physicists hit back at King after call for scientists to focus on more "immediate" problems
http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=403605