

Emma Napper – The Irish Times

When the BA called me up to offer me a media fellowship I was over the moon. I had spent a week going through hours of videotapes of ants. Ants sleeping, ants ignoring any stimulus, ants reacting to inanimate objects, ants generally misbehaving, I was beginning to wonder why I had bothered. The call really cheered me up. Although the third year of a PhD isn't the best time to take a break, I really needed a change of scene.

I applied for the media fellowship because I think that a major part of studying conservation biology is getting the public involved. I had done a course on communicating with the public, enjoyed it and decided that whatever job I get after my PhD, I want science communication to be part of it. I had also heard a lot of bad things about science reporting from colleagues at the institute where I work – mostly about GM. I shared their annoyance at seeing things written in the press that were inaccurate with (barely) hidden agendas. However, I wanted to understand why this happened and how I could have a good enough relationship with the press to tell them about my work in an interesting and accurate way.

I had a little experience with the press before the fellowship. I had talked to a paper once and been briefly interviewed about my work on BBC Radio Sheffield, which was very scary, as I had no idea at all what to expect. I also had no idea if I had said the right things and if it had been interesting to the audience.

People at my work had a mixed reaction to my application. Some of them were very pleased and thought it would be great opportunity. Others, snorted contempt and thought it was very silly and not at all scientific – however they would indulge me.

My placement was with *The Irish Times*, Ireland's national newspaper. This meant living in Dublin for 5 weeks, which I was very pleased about. During my time at the IT I was going to work with the science editor, Dick Ahlstrom. I talked to Dick only once before the placement and as well as sorting out practicalities and finding out a bit about what I was going to do at the paper, I asked him something that had really been worrying me. "Do you have a dress code?" " No" Dick answered, "Its quite informal – sometimes when it gets hot the men even take their ties off. Don't worry, its not like you're some student turning up to work in jeans and t-shirts" and he laughed. "No, of course not" I replied – sitting on my chair in the lab in a pair of jeans and my t-shirt. I decided then that it was necessary to make quick trip to get a pair of smart trousers, a top and even maybe a pair of girl's shoes.

I was slightly nervous because I wanted to know as much as possible about the paper but couldn't find a copy anywhere. Eventually, I got them to send me a copy of the Thursday paper from Dublin. I was very grateful, as I was able to see a bit of

the Science Today page and got an idea of the sort of articles that I would be involved in.

Working at *The Irish Times* was fantastic. I had no idea what sort of atmosphere to expect (any ideas I had about newspaper offices were mainly based on Superman). However everyone was very friendly and welcoming, no matter how important they were. The hours were 10:30am (you will be spotted as a fake if you turn up before that) until around 7pm, or whenever you had finished writing for the day. Everyone was working hard and it was very satisfying to see blank computer screens in the morning turn out something you could buy on the street the next day. I was shown the whole process of making a paper while I was there, and it was fascinating.

Everyone works to strict deadlines and the deadline for Science Today articles was Monday – the day I started. In general the Science Today page has 3 or 4 main feature articles of about 600 – 800 words. They are written using a combination of information from press releases, interviews with the scientists and recent scientific publications. I had mentioned when I arrived that some of my fieldwork took place in County Clare, so Dick thought it would be a good plan for me to try and write something about my work as one of the features that first week. I was surprised at being given this on my first day but very happy that the first person I would have to interview was not a complete stranger. I rang my boss, tried to scribble down everything he said including some interesting quotes and then tried to write something that would be interesting to the public. Looking back I can see lots of things I could have done better in that article but Dick was happy enough, made a few changes and there it was in print on the Thursday. It was a very satisfying feeling, and we had got the first bit of Irish coverage of our project.

Covering other people's work was an entirely different matter. I realised pretty quickly that Dick had an amazing knowledge of all sorts of areas of science and could cover almost any topic from astronomy and maths to medicine and ecology. He was very keen to give me the experience of writing on topics I knew little about (not hard to find). I think this also really gave me the chance to experience what it is like as a journalist to try and translate into readable English difficult subjects told to you in jargon.

I think the biggest challenge was an article on joystick-controlled cars, where the mechanical link between the steering wheel and the wheels is replaced by an electronic joystick (like on an aeroplane). I rang the lead scientist and asked him what he was doing. In the 10 minutes that followed I wrote down everything I thought he said. My page was full of phrases like "time-triggered control area network", "computer modelling then verification" and "different economy of scale". I asked him a couple of questions put the phone down but by the end of the interview I had no idea what he did. For other interviews, I had had the luxury of looking up a bit about the subject and what the jargon they might use meant. The car interview had been a last minute thing and probably a more realistic taste of what journalists are faced with every day. As an interviewer, I had not asked the

right questions but the scientist had also made mistakes. He should have thought more about the main goal of his work and decided what the most important points were. Instead of using jargon, he needed to think of other ways of explaining what his group did. In the end, I spent a long time going through my notes and looking at his work. I decided what I thought he was doing and rang him back. He was very patient and in the end I got an article that we were both pleased with it.

I also got a chance to write a couple of pieces for the news pages including one for the front page. This was a very different skill, as stories would come in (normally as very short press releases) and the article would have to be finished two hours later. Given this time pressure, it is amazing how accurate most of the reporting is especially as most of the time given to the article is spent ringing around desperately trying to get interviews.

I spent the second to last week of my placement with Dick at the BA Festival of Science. Here again was a different sort of article – one based on ten-minute press conferences. Each day we would send 4 or so short stories to Dublin. I had expected to attend some of the hundreds of scientific lectures taking place during the week but I realized very quickly that there was no time for that. Press conferences, where scientists are shipped in to talk to assembled press, were carried out every half hour throughout the day. We picked what looked interesting and then split the conferences between us, so most of the subjects were covered. During the 10-minute press conference anyone could ask questions and then that was it. It was amazing to see how the other papers and Dick picked the stories too. A lively presentation by the scientist with a good picture was just as important as good science. Any scientist who had thought of a catchy or sexy line was almost guaranteed to have their piece covered. In the gaps between press conferences, we typed away and by 6pm we had finished for the day, ready for lots of free drinks! The festival was lots of fun and a good chance to meet all the other people in the science media and see how they worked. My own personal highlight however had to be attending a press conference with David Attenborough!

So after all of that my main conclusion is that the media fellowship is a fantastic scheme. I learned an unbelievable amount in the six weeks with *The Irish Times* and I know that it will help me a great deal with giving any interviews or press conferences and writing press releases in the future. Dick and the other people at the paper were very helpful and welcoming, and I owe them a great deal. Dick is so enthusiastic about the Media Fellowships and has left me with a fantastic view of the press, much brighter than the gloomy picture painted by some scientists. I think that some of my colleagues are still saying that telling the public what they do is not serious enough to bother with, but I notice that every organisation I am involved with has written down my placement as part of their commitment to public awareness for this year. Now I will go back to looking at my ant videos with a renewed enthusiasm.