



## Media Fellowships

### Media Fellow Report 2009

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#### **Daily Mirror & Science Media Centre**

#### **Placements**

##### Daily Mirror

My first placement on this Media Fellowship was at the Daily Mirror in Canary Wharf, working with the science editor, Mike Swain. I had spoken with Mike a few times before I started the placement, and I had the pleasure of meeting him at the initial induction day for the Fellowship. Mike is what I affectionately refer to as a 'proper old-school hack'; he has worked as a journalist for most of his professional life and moved to the Daily Mirror after working in various local newspapers. During my placement he was incredibly patient, spending time talking me through the writing style unique to the Daily Mirror, which differed considerably to the one I was used to in academia. The writing style had to be far more concise, the grammatical structure more accessible, unnecessary jargon was removed and you had to get to the point as soon as possible. The writing style and language also had to reflect the particular interests of the Daily Mirror readership. Although I had attended media training on journalistic writing style in the past, it was initially difficult to adapt to this style. It took me the better part of an afternoon to write my first 300 word story. Mike also introduced me to the fantastic book 'Waterhouse on Newspaper Style' by Keith Waterhouse, the near legendary Daily Mirror writer. It was incredibly insightful and more than a little humorous.

Although I am by preference a broadsheet reader, I have never viewed the tabloids in a negative way. I went in with the intention of keeping a completely open mind about how the Daily Mirror operates. My typical duties involved reading through all of the national UK newspapers for science stories, to see how their coverage compared to that in the Daily Mirror. I also spent considerable time drafting up stories on the latest press releases and briefings. Initially these were just short 200 to 300 word articles, but I had soon I had progressed to doing more in-depth articles up to 600 words in length. To prepare for these articles I did considerable background reading and often contacted the lead researchers to go clarify things and obtain quotes. In a short space of time I became familiar with a diverse range of scientific topics. Although my articles didn't go to press in the paper itself, I did have the opportunity to write them up for the science blog on the Daily Mirror website. Compared to academia, where articles can take years to come to press, it was great to see that anything I wrote for the blog was up by the end of the day.

However, I was certainly not tied to a desk during my placement. I attended numerous press briefings, including those at the Science Media Centre and the



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weekly press briefing on swine flu by the Government's chief medical officer. I even had the chance to attend a celebrity event on climate change at the Tate Modern, and an advance tour of the new Darwin Centre opening at the Natural History Museum. I also got insight into how things operate behind the scenes at the Daily Mirror, and the various stages that a story goes through from the initial press release through to actual publication.

My experiences at the Daily Mirror were absolutely fantastic. Mike was incredibly supportive and interesting to work with, and I was impressed by his dedication to reporting science stories as accurately as possible. I learnt how the tabloid press works and I gained great insight into how the press works. For me, this was one of the main aims of the Fellowship.

### Science Media Centre

Although I had attended a few press briefings at the Science Media Centre (SMC) during my time at the Daily Mirror, I didn't really know what to expect before my placement with them began. I discovered that the SMC functions in many ways as a press office for new scientific research. They do not aim to promote any particular perspective or political ideology, aside from making sure that scientists producing 'good science' (as opposed to Ben Goldacre style 'bad science') had a chance to report their findings to the press.

The SMC staff were a delight to work with and were always very enthusiastic and considerate. They all had a genuine passion for ensuring that scientific stories were accurately reported by the press, and were incredibly patient when helping scientists to prepare for their press briefings. Everyone was also very keen to informally discuss topical scientific issues and their coverage in the press. I found these talks to be both very insightful and often very humorous.

My placement involved reviewing the coverage of science-based stories in all of the UK national newspapers, particularly looking for coverage of any research showcased at the SMC. I would also help to organise the press briefing events, recording who the attendees were and their affiliations as well as helping with general organisational issues. In addition to these activities I assisted the SMC in preparing a background fact sheet for journalists on epigenetics. I've since heard that this fact sheet was very popular and useful.

One focus that I maintained throughout my placement with the SMC was to monitor the coverage of swine flu, and assist in preparing background information for journalists on this matter. As part of these duties I implemented an online survey for journalists to identify any issues associated with swine flu they wished to clarify. I also prepared a very detailed fact sheet on key terms associated with swine flu. This glossary was actually launched at an event at the British Science Festival.



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Through attending numerous press briefings at the SMC I also got to know a large number of science correspondents working in the UK. This would prove very useful when interacting with them at the British Science Festival.

### **British Science Association Festival of Science**

Working at the British Science Association Festival of Science was incredibly exciting. I attended several press briefings every day and prepared short reports on them for both the British Science Association website and the Daily Mirror's Science blog. The press briefings were on a number of very diverse topics, and I made a conscious effort not to cover many stories related to my own fields of expertise. I felt that this would mimic the behaviour of professional science correspondents, who have to write articles on confusing and unfamiliar subjects on a daily basis. The evenings were generally spent socialising with the other Media Fellows and journalists, and served as a great opportunity to compare notes and generally chew the journalistic fat. The festival was a great chance to put my new journalistic skills to the test and was an absolutely superb end to my Media Fellowship.

### **Post-Fellowship activities**

After returning to my work as a lecturer, I've had several opportunities to apply the skills I learnt while on the Fellowship. Primarily this has been when presenting my own research or preparing articles for publication, particularly articles for more general/less specialised publications. My experiences on the Fellowship have given me a greater awareness of the issues associated with a story or piece of scientific research which are likely to be of interest to target audiences.

I have also become far more interested in public engagement with scientific issues. For example, I have volunteered for a number of talks through the Café Scientifique scheme in various cities across the UK. I am now more interested in how the media is represented in my own field of psychology, and have submitted an article on how the media is portrayed to the *Psychologist* magazine. I have also just heard that I have been accepted onto the British Psychological Society's Press and Media Committee.

Many of my work colleagues have previously been weary of the media but, after talking to them about my Fellowship experiences, they are becoming more curious about media engagement. I am currently planning a seminar at my home institution where these issues can be further discussed with my colleagues.



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### Appendix

#### Articles from Daily Mirror Placement

All of the following articles/links were prepared for the Daily Mirror Science Blog (available at <http://blogs.mirror.co.uk/science/>)

<http://blogs.mirror.co.uk/science/2009/09/mirror-says-goodbye-to-mark.html>

<http://blogs.mirror.co.uk/science/2009/09/the-supernaturalspace-and-foot.html>

<http://blogs.mirror.co.uk/science/2009/09/pest-wars-and-human-ancestors.html>

<http://blogs.mirror.co.uk/science/2009/09/from-scientist-to-roving-repor.html>

<http://blogs.mirror.co.uk/science/2009/09/mark-leaves-the-mirror.html>

<http://blogs.mirror.co.uk/science/2009/09/epigenetics-and-tigers-brains.html>

<http://blogs.mirror.co.uk/science/2009/09/robot-prostitutes-giant-space.html>

<http://blogs.mirror.co.uk/science/2009/08/beetroot-birds-and-old-age-hap.html>

<http://blogs.mirror.co.uk/science/2009/08/swine-flu-dinosaurs-and-embarg.html>

<http://blogs.mirror.co.uk/science/2009/08/scientist-continues-placement.html>

<http://blogs.mirror.co.uk/science/2009/08/scientist-sees-how-mirror-work.html>

#### Articles for Science Media Centre

The two articles attached to this document ('Epigenetics factsheet' and 'Swine flu glossary') are fact sheets and definitions of key terms for journalists that I help to produce

#### Articles for British Science Festival

*When a baby chimp is happy*

Newborn chimpanzees use up to 16 different smiles when they're happy, whereas human babies have only 13.

[http://www.britishtscienceassociation.org/web/News/FestivalNews/\\_WhenBabyChimp.htm](http://www.britishtscienceassociation.org/web/News/FestivalNews/_WhenBabyChimp.htm)

*Genes unzip agricultural pests*

<http://www.britishtscienceassociation.org/MediaFellows>



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With the mapping of the aphid genome, to be published later this year, scientists should be able to develop more effective insecticides.

[http://www.britishtscienceassociation.org/web/News/FestivalNews/\\_GenesUnzip.htm](http://www.britishtscienceassociation.org/web/News/FestivalNews/_GenesUnzip.htm)

*Selenium could cut UK mortality rates*

Adding selenium to fertilizer could boost health in the UK.

[http://www.britishtscienceassociation.org/web/News/FestivalNews/\\_Selenium.htm](http://www.britishtscienceassociation.org/web/News/FestivalNews/_Selenium.htm)

*Why do people believe in the supernatural?*

Belief in the supernatural may be linked to how we make sense of the world in childhood.

[http://www.britishtscienceassociation.org/web/News/FestivalNews/\\_Supernatural.htm](http://www.britishtscienceassociation.org/web/News/FestivalNews/_Supernatural.htm)

*The science of human attraction*

We find people who look like us 'trustworthy and not lust-worthy', according to Dr Lisa DeBruine, a lecturer in psychology at the University of Aberdeen.

[http://www.britishtscienceassociation.org/web/News/FestivalNews/\\_TheScienceof+HumanAttraction.htm](http://www.britishtscienceassociation.org/web/News/FestivalNews/_TheScienceof+HumanAttraction.htm)

*Second wave of swine flu expected soon*

Health experts predict a second wave of swine flu to hit the UK during October, said Professor John Beddington, Chief Scientific Adviser to the UK government, at the British Science Festival on Thursday.

[http://www.britishtscienceassociation.org/web/News/FestivalNews/\\_SecondWaveofSwineFlu.htm](http://www.britishtscienceassociation.org/web/News/FestivalNews/_SecondWaveofSwineFlu.htm)