

## **BA Media Fellowships**

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## Summary of key findings and recommendations

	Themes	Key findings	Actions/recommendations for the BA
1.	<b>Media</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) The scheme successfully increases fellows' abilities and willingness to deal with the media by increasing their confidence and providing them with useful</li> <li>b) The scheme provides fellows with useful and long-lasting media contacts</li> <li>c) The scheme has a positive effect on fellows' perceptions of science journalists but some negative feelings about science in the media remain</li> </ul>	<p>Develop the aims of the scheme to reflect the increase in confidence and willingness to deal with the media, and development of long-lasting relationships.</p> <p>Investigate the possibility of placements with news journalists (rather than just science journalists).</p>
2.	<b>Career</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) The majority (72%) of fellows are still working scientists or engineers</li> <li>b) The scheme has a positive influence on the majority of fellows' careers</li> <li>c) The scheme provides valuable transferable skills</li> </ul>	<p>Highlight these benefits when advertising scheme</p>
3.	<b>Colleagues</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Fellows take time to pass on their skills and experiences to colleagues</li> <li>b) Some fellows feel there is a lack of support for their activities within their organisations</li> <li>c) Lack of awareness about the scheme at all levels within an organisation can hinder fellows' applications</li> <li>d) Contact with other media fellows is highly valued</li> </ul>	<p>Investigate ways to advertise the scheme and its benefits to employers.</p> <p>Work further with sponsors to increase impact within the organisations they fund.</p> <p>Consider ways to increase follow-up after the scheme, e.g. a possible forum for past fellows to share experiences.</p>
4.	<b>Science Communication</b>	<p>The scheme encourages involvement in science communication activities by developing skills and increasing confidence</p>	<p>Consider using this positive outcome as an aim of the scheme.</p> <p>Encourage past fellows to be involved in other BA projects.</p>
5.	<b>BA Membership</b>	<p>The recent policy of giving one year's free BA memberships to fellows does not seem to encourage continuing membership</p>	<p>Previous flaws in the membership scheme have left fellows without membership; checks should be made to ensure fellows are receiving benefits.</p>

## **BA Media Fellowships scheme - Evaluation**

### **Introduction**

The BA's Media Fellowship scheme was established in 1987, and offers working scientists, social scientists and engineers the opportunity to undertake a placement with one of a variety of outlets across print, broadcast and online media. Placements offered in the last two years have included BBC TV, BBC Radio Science Unit, the Guardian, the Financial Times, Nature, and the Irish Times.

A maximum of 10 fellowships are awarded each year to scientists, social scientists or engineers who have a minimum of 2 years postgraduate experience and can gain consent to be released on full pay for the duration of the placement.

Placements last three to eight weeks, during which time fellows work as journalists, learning to work within the conditions and constraints of the media to produce accurate and well informed pieces about current developments in science.

### **Aims of the scheme**

The current aims of the scheme are

- to create greater awareness and understanding of the workings of the media among practising engineers and scientists
- to provide active researchers with an insight into the media which can be employed not only for the individual concerned but also their colleagues

The scheme hopes to address the negative views that scientists often hold about the mass media, giving them the chance to experience first-hand life on the other side of the fence. A more open approach from the scientific community when dealing with the media may assist the BA's aim to connect science with people.

### **The evaluation process**

The evaluation has been carried out in order to determine if the scheme is achieving its stated aims and whether those aims are beneficial for the BA, the sponsors, the hosts and the fellows.

The evaluation was carried out in two stages consisting of a questionnaire and a focus group. Following the collation of the results from the questionnaire the focus group was organised to further explore past fellow comments.

## Questionnaire

In order to reach as many past fellows as possible, a questionnaire was designed and emailed to all those for whom a current contact address had been found. An internet search was used to find possible contact details for the 147 past fellows, 117 possible contacts were found and of those, 93 confirmed that they were the correct person. In total, seventy questionnaires were returned, meaning that nearly half (47.6%) of all past fellows were consulted.

There was an even spread of respondents across the seventeen years of the scheme (see figure 1), with between 2 and 6 fellows for each year apart from 1991, which had no returned questionnaires.

It should be noted that there may have been a sampling bias due to the use of the internet to locate past fellows. Those who no longer work in a field which makes use of the internet, or anyone who changed their name, is unlikely to have been found. However, found fellows were asked if they had contact details for any other fellows, which did yield some extra contacts.

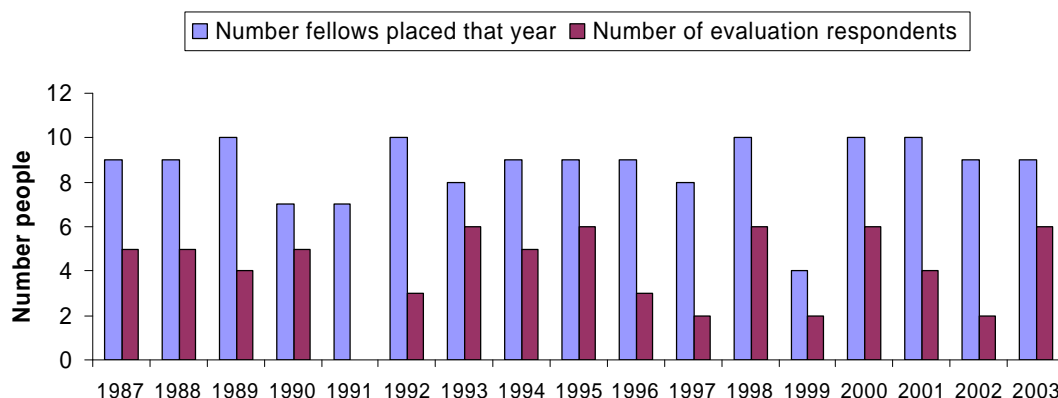


Figure 1. Fellows data

The questionnaire covered five main areas, pre-placement expectations, the media, career, colleagues and science communication; and contained a mix of closed questions (to allow for easy quantitative analysis) and open questions (in order to gather qualitative data).

## Focus group evaluation

The focus group was held in London on the evening of 28 July 2004 and one or two media fellows from each year, except 1997 and 1999, participated.

Participants were asked to discuss what media skills they had used following their placement, any barriers faced when pursuing media coverage, and how the BA could help fellows maximise on their experiences.

For the purpose of this report comments from the questionnaire and focus group have been categorised into the following areas.

**Media**

Do fellows report that they are now better equipped to deal with the media?  
Does the scheme change fellows' perceptions of science journalists?

**Career**

What impact did the scheme have on the fellows' careers?

**Colleagues**

Do fellows' pass on their experiences to colleagues?  
How do fellows interact with colleagues on their return?

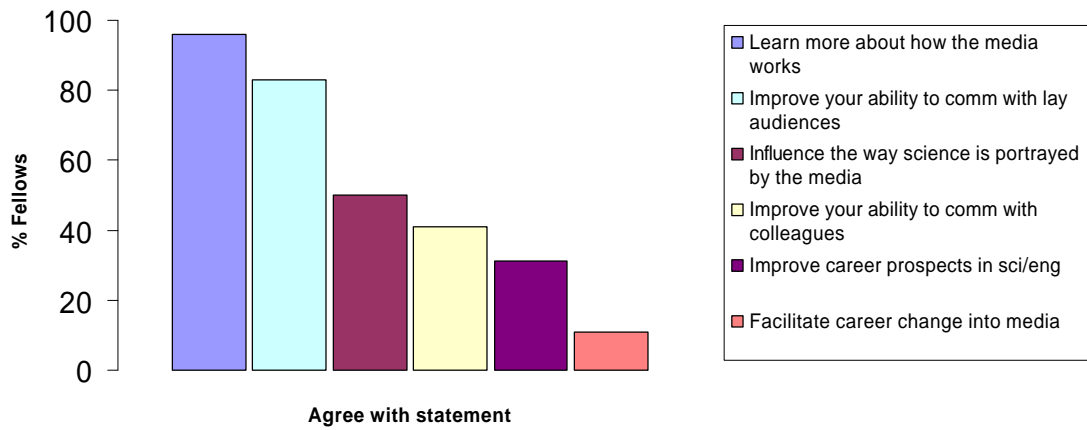
**Science Communication**

Do fellows' engage in increased science communication work as a result of the scheme?

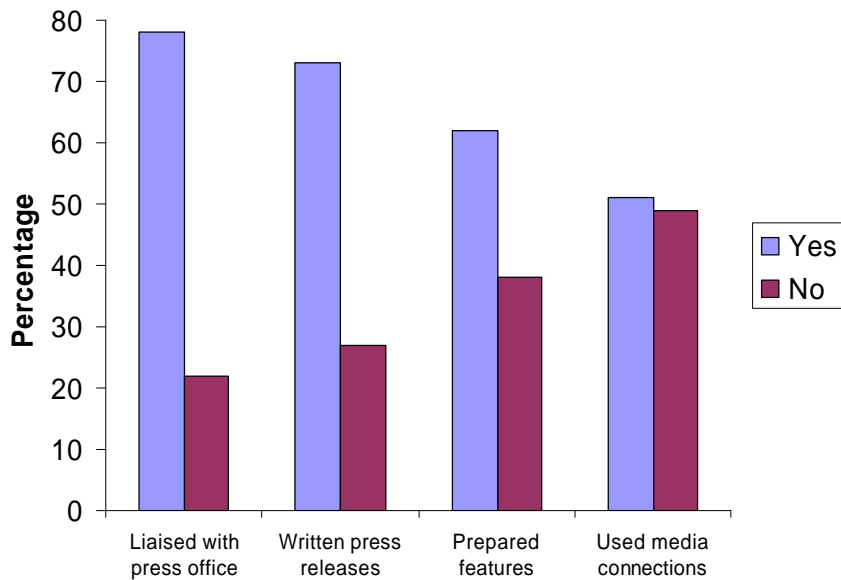
**BA Membership**

Does the recent policy of providing 1 year's free membership increase ongoing BA support?

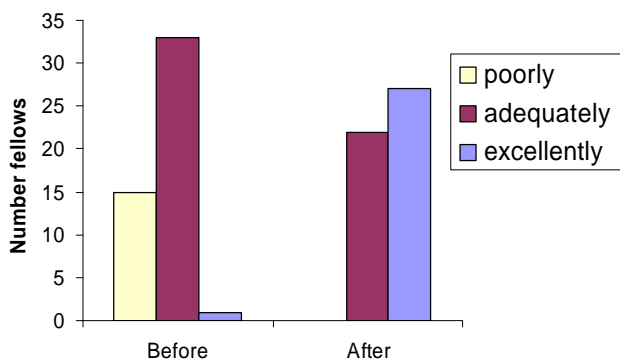
**Figure 2. What fellows hope to achieve from the placement**



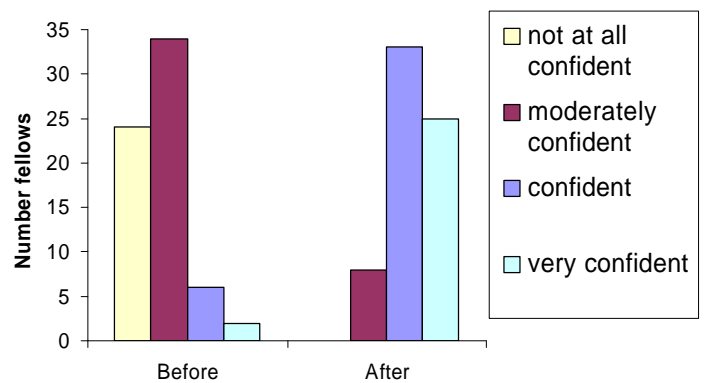
**Figure 3. How fellows use their experience to generate publicity**



**Figure 4. Success in getting story across**



**Figure 5. Confidence in dealing with the media**



## 1. MEDIA

### **a) Increasing confidence in working with the media**

There are two main objectives that fellows hope to achieve from the placement; to learn more about the media and, to improve their ability to communicate with lay audiences (see figure 2).

Over half of the media fellows (54%) claim to have used their media experience to help generate publicity for their research unit or institution, and this is backed up by the 34% who feel that the number of stories generated by their unit has increased as a result of their fellowship. Of those who had experience with the media both before and after the placement, 76% felt that they managed to get their story across more successfully after the fellowship (see figure 4).

The most common ways to use their experience were to liaise with their press office, or to write their own press releases, in total, around 40% of fellows do each of these things, and a third prepare their own features on return to work. Figure 3 shows the breakdown of what those who said they use their media experience actually do.

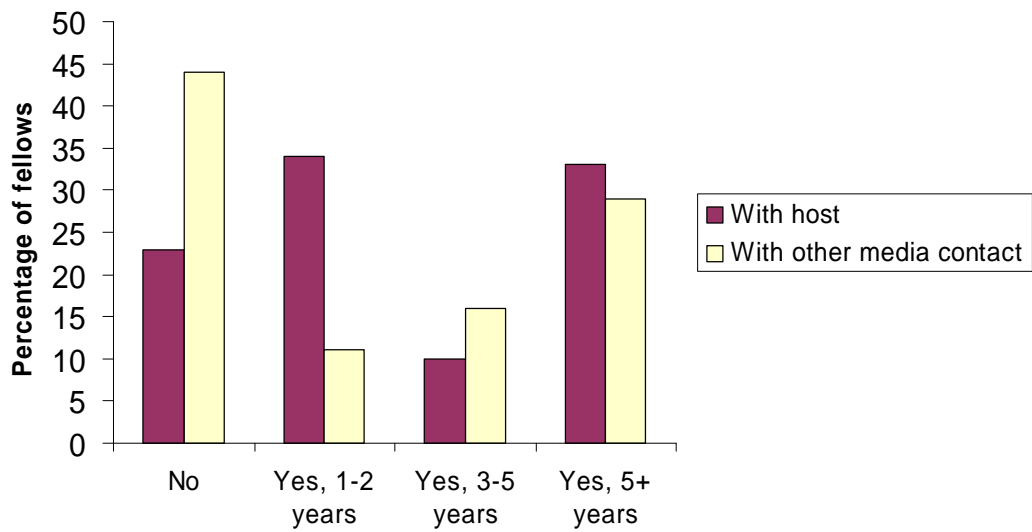
The role of fellows working with their institution's press office or working as the press contact for their department were discussed in further detail in the focus group. All participants had attempted to undertake some press work for their department or organisation on returning to work and their experiences varied. Some felt that their colleagues were over critical of their press work while others had press work incorporated into their current job descriptions. Some fellows stated that it was difficult to get in contact with their institution's press office or did not know the best person to contact.

Exactly half of all fellows who remain practising scientists/engineers have undertaken some paid media work since their placement, and just over a third continue to do so. The type of media activities mentioned here were varied. Fellows have written articles or had regular columns for the national press or more specialist titles such as Nature and 'trade' magazines. Several fellows have written popular science books or contributed to television and radio broadcasts.

The overwhelming majority of fellows (83%) reported that the scheme had increased their confidence in dealing with the media, with 88% declaring themselves to be confident or very confident after the placement (see figure 5). This indicates that the scheme is successful in giving fellows an understanding of how the media works and how to use that knowledge.

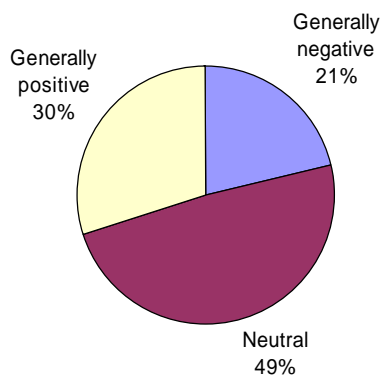
*"My interaction with the media is better. I'm no longer defensive but use it as an opportunity to inform the public"*

**Figure 6. Maintaining contacts with media representatives**

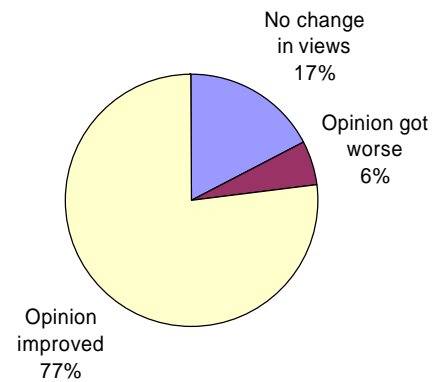


**Perceptions of science journalists:**

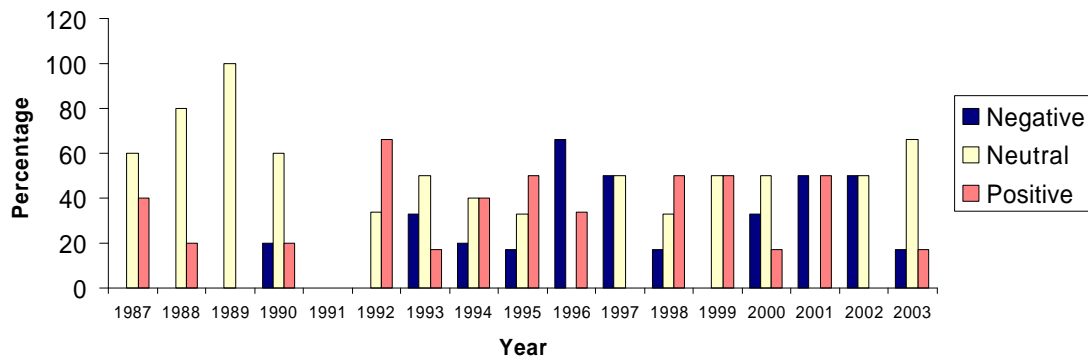
**Figure 7. Before the placement**



**Figure 8. After the placement**



**Figure 9. Perceptions of science journalists before the placement, by year**



## **b) Maintaining contacts**

Overall, 43% of fellows have kept in contact with their host or other media representative for more than five years, which is a surprisingly high number given the relatively short length of their placement. Figure 6 indicates how long contact was kept. The qualitative data suggests that these links have been useful, with around a quarter mentioning media contributions that they made, or continue to make as a result of these contacts. Further evaluation will be conducted with the hosts to determine if these links are mutually beneficial.

## **c) Perceptions of the media**

Fellows' perceptions of the media before the placement were mixed, just under half held a neutral view, with about a third holding a generally positive view and the remainder (21%) holding a generally negative view of science journalists (see figure 7).

Fellows felt that the science they encountered in the media was sometimes inaccurate, and that journalists did not know much about science. A couple of fellows noted that their neutral or negative opinions stemmed mainly from the views of colleagues.

*"The general perception among scientists is that journalists will misinterpret their work. I had no contact with the media myself, so I believed this."*

Interestingly, as figure 9 shows, before the mid 1990s there were very few negative perceptions of science journalists. It is tempting to suppose that the highly publicised controversies over vCJD and GM crops that emerged from that time onwards may have had an effect on this trend, but the numbers are too small to support that kind of conclusion. Also, it is possible that fellows who completed the scheme many years ago have a more mellowed perception of how they actually felt at the time; or that as the scheme was quite a new idea at that time, it only attracted media-positive scientists.

The fellowship undoubtedly has a positive effect on the fellows' perceptions of science journalists with over three quarters saying that their opinion of science journalists improved after the fellowship (see figure 8). The majority of those whose views were unaltered had previously held a positive view (58%). In total only 10% said that their opinion got worse or their negative opinion remained unaltered, many of these made the point that it was not *science* journalists but general journalists for whom they had little respect.

*"My good opinion of the 'professional' science journalists did not change. However, I realised just how bad 'general' journalists could be."*

The most common reasons given for improved opinions were a new respect for the breadth and depth of science journalists' knowledge, as well as a realisation about the pressure they work under and the level of professionalism they maintain.

However, many fellows still feel there are problems with science in the media but that these are not related to the quality of science journalists. The variability of quality which resulted from non-specialists covering science was commented on frequently. This suggests that placements should be established with news journalists (as opposed to science journalists) in order to try and bridge the gap that obviously still exists between them and the scientific community.

Figure 10. Percentage of fellows still in science or changed career

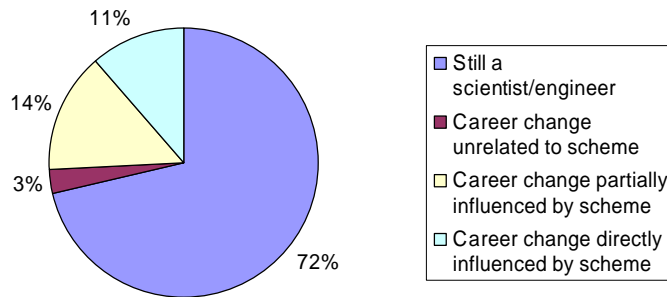
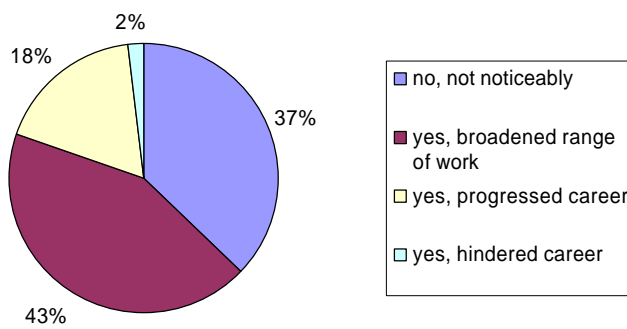


Figure 11. Effect on career for those still in science or engineering



## 2. CAREER

### a) Career change

It was felt that the media fellowships might be being used as a springboard to a media career, or might be encouraging fellows to move in that direction; which would run counter to the aims of the scheme. However, when asked what they had hoped to achieve from the fellowship, half of the fellows hoped to influence the portrayal of science and only 11% wished to facilitate a career change into media (see figure 2). This low number hoping to develop a career in the media suggests that the people being selected for the scheme fit the current aims, that is, to help practising scientists by giving them an insight into the media.

*"I wanted to understand how the media worked and...I wanted to get better at communicating about my research"*

The majority of fellows (72%) are still working scientists or engineers (see figure 10). 3% left through no relation to the scheme, 14% said that the scheme partially influenced their move and the remainder said the scheme directly influenced their decision.

The current professions of those whose move was influenced in some way by the scheme are listed below.

Profession now	No. fellows
(Science) journalism or broadcasting	8
Science policy work	4
Science press officer	1
Training officer	1
Professor of science communication	1
Head of communication in science organisation	1
Senior management in science organisation	1
Senior management in broadcasting	1

Table 1.

### b) Positive impact on scientific career

Those who are still in science or engineering were asked if the scheme had had an impact on their careers, over half (61%) felt that their career had been progressed, or their range of work broadened by their placement experience (see figure 11). Only one fellow felt that their career had been hindered by the scheme, stating that media work was "a distraction".

The scheme has helped progress careers by being an 'impressive' example of commitment to public engagement and providing media and communications skills that are valued by employers. It has broadened the range of work in which fellows engage by increasing their interaction with the media and increasing the amount of science communication work they are involved in. The fellowship has helped raise individuals' profiles and led to them being used as a resource for helping write press releases and other communications activities.

The vast majority of fellows said that the scheme had not had an effect on the number of research papers they produce, but 10% claimed to have produced more as a result of the fellowship and 4% said they produced less.

All fellows are keen to advertise their participation in the scheme, with only 7% noting that they only 'sometimes' advertised their fellowship. The fellowship is generally felt to be something to be proud of, and something that indicates a good breadth of experience and skills.

### ***c) Utilising new skills day-to-day***

When asked if they utilised any skills gained on their placement in day-to-day tasks, 70% of fellows still in science claimed that they did.

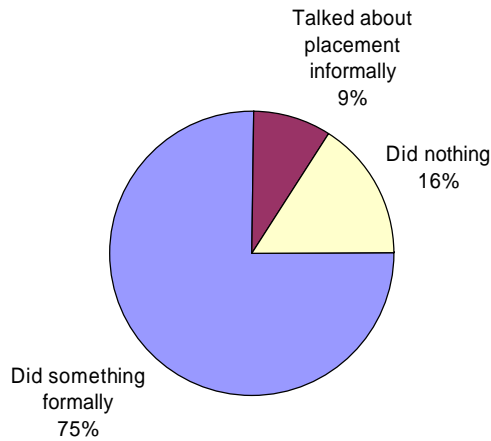
When asked to give details, several points were raised repeatedly

- Increased speed and efficiency in writing and working to deadlines
- Greater clarity and focus in written work (particularly grant applications and scientific papers)
- Improved communication skills
- Improved presentation skills

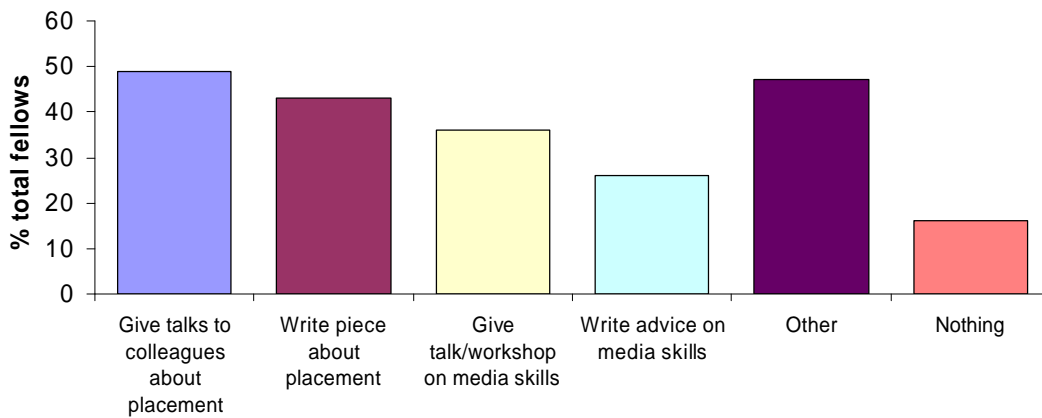
Fellows feel that they are better able to understand and target different audiences, whether professional or public.

This issue was explored further in the focus group and fellows stated that on returning to work they were able to apply their new skills to write better grant proposals. By looking at their research area from a journalist's point of view they were able think more critically and pick out the areas that would have the greatest impact. Fellows also noted that grant proposals were easier to write because of their improved writing skills.

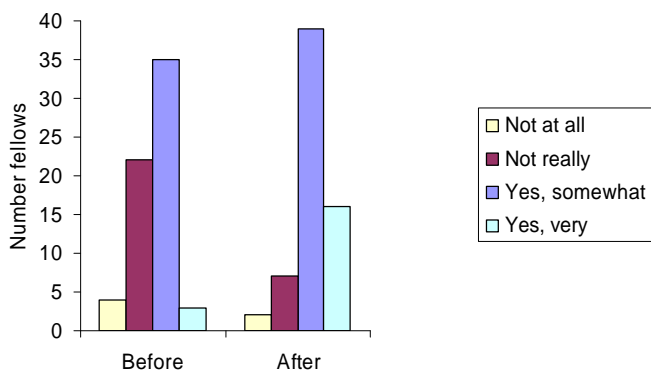
**Figure 12. Percentage of fellows who communicated their experience to colleagues**



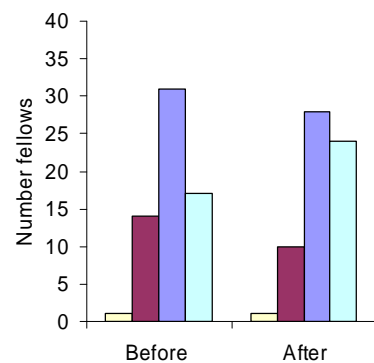
**Figure 13. Communicating experiences and passing on skills**



**Figure 14. Do colleagues think the scheme is worthwhile?**



**Figure 15. Do employers think the scheme is worthwhile?**



### **3. COLLEAGUES**

#### ***a) Communicating experiences and passing on skills***

As expected from answers to previous questions, most fellows (87%) encourage others to do the scheme. The majority take the time to communicate their experiences to colleagues by doing something formally (see figure 12). The main activities undertaken are shown in figure 13. Of the 11 fellows who did nothing to communicate their experience on return to work, 5 of them noted by way of explanation that their institution was not interested or supportive.

The focus group discussed the level of support fellows received on return to work from their colleagues. Those who had a positive reception typically worked for organisations committed to holding regular seminars and the fellows presented within an existing communication programme. Fellows who worked for organisations where formal talks were not commonplace found it difficult to find a mechanism to share their experiences.

#### ***b) Making an impact***

We were interested to know whether colleagues are interested in the scheme when fellows return to work, the data shows that 84% are either somewhat or very interested. Figures 14 and 15 show the opinions of colleagues and employers about the scheme both before and after the fellow took part.

Most fellows felt that colleagues were more positive after the placement. Employers' views are not altered to such an extent, but this is probably due to the fact that most of them already felt positively about the scheme.

There were a noticeable number of comments regarding negative views held by colleagues or employers about the scheme and its potential benefits; and about the general difficulty in making an impact or using their new skills on return to work.

*"One (improvement) would be to require a commitment from the Fellow's employer to utilise their skills once they return"*

It would seem clear that to increase the impact of the scheme, it is vital to ensure fellows' organisations are aware of the benefits of which they can take advantage. It should be explained that they now have a new resource which can be utilised and the fellows' themselves could be briefed more thoroughly about what they can do on their return to work.

#### ***c) Senior colleagues***

When asked about the application procedure for the scheme the most common suggestion (9 fellows) was that the scheme needs to be advertised and promoted more widely. One stated reason for this was that it would have helped the fellow if the scheme had a higher profile because senior colleagues would have been aware of it before the application.

Discussions in the focus group also highlighted the need for the scheme to have its profile raised with colleagues. Fellows stated that colleagues (particularly senior) did not know enough about the scheme and were not interested in utilising their new skills on return to work. Time was the key concern of senior colleagues identified in the

focus group. That is how much time would their press work take away from their 'science' work.

***The focus group made the following recommendations to sell the scheme to releasing organisations:***

- Provide more information via website highlighting the benefits to organisations
- Produce an electronic flyer and
- Publicise to industry.

***d) Contact with other fellows***

Fellows felt that continued contact with others was a positive thing and one recommended meetings of BA media fellows to "*hear what others are doing and what we could do as a group*". Other fellows suggested that more follow-up is required after the placement, for example:

*"I think that this is a worthwhile scheme, but without proper follow-up over the intervening years, it is not unlikely that any 'benefits' will disperse"*

Continued contact with past fellows was discussed in detail at the focus group. All participating fellows stated that an additional benefit of the focus group was the change to make contact with past fellows. Some fellows have kept in contact with a few people but had lost contact with others over the years. Most had tried to maintain contact with the hosts and other journalists they had met during the placement but felt that without legitimate reasons to make contact they were difficult to maintain.

The ideas of holding an annual networking event and creating a website was discussed to assist fellows keeping in touch.

***The focus group made the following recommendations***

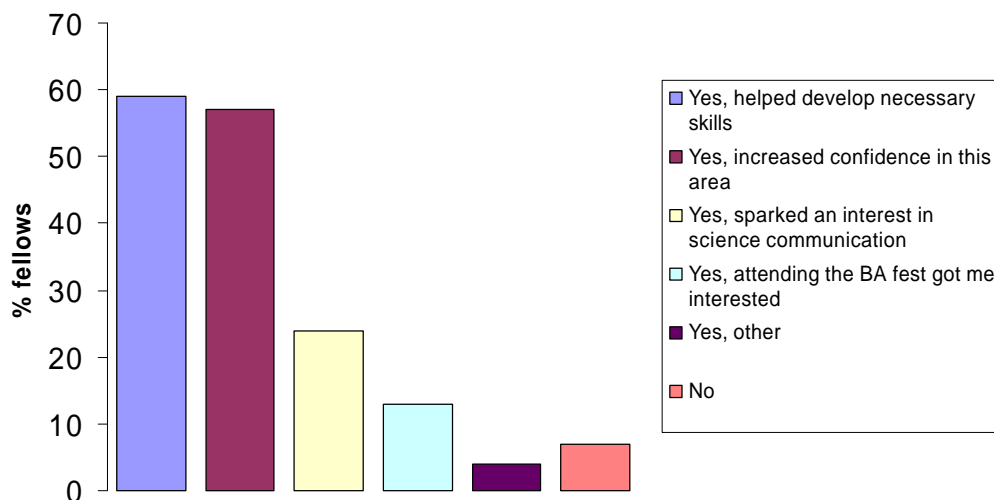
**Organise an annual event for past fellows**

- Invite past fellows, hosts, journalists, editors
- To be part of the BA Festival of Science to encourage fellows to revisit the festival, and to take advantage of the major science journalists attending and the ABSW (Association of British Science Writers), and changing location each year
- To involve two elements: an informal networking event and a seminar to enhance their media skills

**Media Fellows website**

- Develop a website for ex-fellows to exchange contacts, tips and support
- Use BA website to help publicise past fellows articles
- Develop an e-forum for past fellows

**Figure 16. Influence of the fellowship on involvement in science communication**



**Table 2. BA Membership**

Years of scheme	% of fellows currently BA members
Before free membership was given (1987-1998)	22%
Since free membership was introduced (1999-2002)	10%

#### **4. SCIENCE COMMUNICATION**

Fellows were asked whether they took part in any science communication activities (for example, outreach work in schools, science festivals or writing popular science books) before the placement, and whether they had since the placement. There was a slight increase (20%) in activity since the placement, bringing the total to 79% who have done such activities.

A large proportion of fellows (87%) claimed that their fellowship had increased their interest in science communication. The activities engaged in after the fellowships has included workshops in schools and recruitment talks, organisation of science festivals, talks to local groups, work with the BA and writing popular science books.

When probed further, over half said that the fellowship helped develop the skills necessary for science communication and increased their confidence in this area (see figure 16).

#### **5. BA MEMBERSHIP**

26% of past fellows are currently members of the BA, however when those who still hold free membership (fellows from 2003) are removed, this number falls to 18%.

The policy of giving free BA memberships for one year, started in 1999, does not seem to be having an impact on encouraging continuing membership with the BA (see table 2). However one fellow (from 2002) did not receive any membership details or newsletters and so there is the possibility that this problem affected others.

## Logistics and other comments

The simplicity of the **application process** was commented on positively and the main criticisms revolved around timing and the elements of uncertainty that arose whilst hosts made their final decisions.

Print media is the **preferred media** for placements, but a large proportion of fellows were happy with any placement.

A few fellows suggested that there should be 'greater prescription' about what the fellow would be doing while on placement, and more **pre-placement** communication with the host to discuss mutual aims.

One respondent suggested that fellows should **visit each other while on placement** so that they could learn from each others' experiences across different media.

Many of those who have had a **career change** (i.e. left science for a media career) were keen to stress that they felt this was still a positive outcome for the scheme.

*"We need better communicators in every sector, and the scheme plays a vital part"*

There is clearly a huge amount of support for the scheme from previous participants, with many taking the **opportunity to thank the BA** for the fellowship and enthuse about the benefits and experiences they gained.

*"I really think the scheme is very worthwhile"*

*"I found the media fellowship to be an extremely useful experience which substantially improved my understanding of how the media works"*

*"The fellowship was an extremely valuable experience which gave unique hands-on experience of how the media works"*

*"I thought the placement was one of the best experiences of my career. It changed the way I think about science and communication"*